CHATHAM COLLEGE LIBRARY
3 1436 00023 9748

In Memory of
John B. Heron, Jr. and Emily S. Heron
the Library from Hadston their home
was given to
Pennsylvania College for Women
1947

THE FAMILY

(LES PÉLOUEYRES)

BY FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

•

Translated from the French by Lewis Galantière

NEW YORK : COVICI · FRIEDE · PUBLISHERS : MCMXXX

Copyright, 1930, *by* COVICI, FRIEDE INC.

843
M442f

TYPOGRAPHY BY S. A. JACOBS
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE STRATFORD PRESS, INC., NEW YORK

CONTENTS

I

The Kiss to the Leper 3

II

Genitrix 109

To my friend

LOUIS ARTUS

and

To my brother

DOCTOR PIERRE MAURIAC

PROFESSOR IN THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE OF BORDEAUX

With admiration and affection.

F. M.

I

The Kiss to the Leper

THE KISS TO THE LEPER

Chapter i

JEAN PÉLOUEYRE lay stretched out upon his bed. He opened his eyes. Around the house the grasshoppers were making their crackling sound. Light was pouring in like liquid metal through the shutters. Jean had a bitter taste in his mouth as he sat up. He was so small that the low-set pier-glass gave back the image of his hollow cheeks and his long pointed nose which was always red and looked filed down like those sticks of barley-sugar that patient little boys thin down with sucking. His cropped hair came forward in a sharp angle to meet an already creased forehead. He grimaced and showed the bad teeth in his gums. Although he had never hated himself as much as now, he spoke pitying words to himself. "Go out; go strolling, Jean Péloueyre!" He ran one hand over his badly shaved face. But how was he to go out without waking his father? From one o'clock until four Monsieur Jérôme Péloueyre insisted upon ceremonial silence: these sacred hours of the siesta helped him to ward off

the death promised by his nocturnal insomnia. His daily nap cast a torpor over the house: no door was allowed to open or shut, not a word nor a sneeze might break the prodigious silence which, after ten years of supplication and complaint, he had trained Jean and the servants to observe. Even the passers-by were accustomed to lower their voices as they moved under his window, and the carts made a detour in order not to rumble past his door. In spite of this complicity in the interest of his slumber, when he awoke Monsieur Jérôme would insist he had been cheated of his sleep by a clatter of dishes, a bark, or a cough. It may be he was persuaded that absolute silence would insure him an eternal rest as ineluctably flowing into death as a river into the ocean. He always woke badly, shivered despite the dog-days, and came down to sit and read beside the kitchen fire. There, while his bald head reflected the flames, Cadette would look to her sauces with no more heed to the master than if he had been a curing ham. He, on the other hand, would gaze at the ancient peasant woman and reflect with amazement that she who had been born under Louis Philippe knew nothing of the revolutions, the wars, the events that crowded the history of her time, and remembered only the hog she had fat-

tened and whose death she mourned every Christmas day with scant tears wetting her blear eyes.

His father's siesta despite, the furnace out of doors lured Jean Péloueyre. For one thing, he was sure to be alone: he would be able to slip along the thin line of shadow before the houses without a burst of laughter sputtering from the doorsteps where the girls sat sewing. His wretched flight generally drew upon him the mockery of the women; but in this second hour after noon they were still sweating in sleep, and moaning because of the flies. The oiled door did not squeak as he opened it. As he crossed the hall where the cupboards sent forth their odour of jams and mould and the kitchen its clinging smell of grease his slippers seemed to add to the silence. From beneath a boar's head he unhooked his 24-calibre which was known to all the magpies of the township: Jean Péloueyre was the sworn enemy of magpies. Several generations had left their sticks in the cane-rack: there was the shooting-stick of his great-uncle Ousilanne, the fishing-rod and sword-stick of his grandfather Lapeignine, and there were the iron-tipped sticks they carried when they were in the country, at Bagnères-de-Bigorre. A stuffed heron was perched above the credence in the hall.

Jean went out. Like water in a pool, the heat opened and then closed over him. For a moment he thought of going down to the clump of trees where, just before it crosses the village, the stream exhales its frozen breath and the odour of underground springs. But the mosquitoes had annoyed him there only yesterday. And besides, his desire was to speak a word to some living being. He went therefore towards the lodging of Dr. Pieuchon, whose son Robert, a medical student, had come home that morning for his vacation.

Nothing breathed, nothing seemed to live; but now and then the sun would gleam upon a pair of spectacles seen between half-closed shutters on the forehead of some old woman. Jean walked between two blind walls of gardens. He liked this path because no eye was ambushed here and he could give himself up to his reflections. When he meditated he would wrinkle his forehead, wave his arms, laugh, declaim verses, carry on an entire pantomime which the village observed with gusts of laughter. Here the indulgent trees closed over his solitary colloquies. Yet, how much he should have preferred to walk through the tangled streets of some great city where a man may talk to himself without people turning and staring. Or at least so Daniel Trasis

wrote Jean in his letter. Daniel was in Paris where, with the disapproval of his parents, he had "gone in for literature". Jean imagined him gathering himself up and then bounding into the Parisian crowd, plunging into it like a diver. Probably at this instant he was swimming in it, panting towards some goal—fortune, love, fame, all the fruits forbidden the mouth of Jean Péloueyre.

He walked softly into the doctor's house. The servant said that the gentlemen were lunching out, and Jean decided to wait for Dr. Pieuchon's son, whose room gave on the entry. This room so resembled its owner that once one had seen it, one had no further desire to know him. On the wall hung a pipe-rack and a collection of posters announcing student balls; on the table was a skull insulted by a short-stemmed pipe; and there were books about of the sort read in the idle hours of vacation periods—Aphrodite, The Latin Orgy, The Garden of Tortures, the Diary of a Chambermaid. Jean's eye fell upon a volume of Nietzsche, and he glanced through it. From an open box there rose the odour given off by a student's summer clothing. Jean read this: "What is good? Everything in man that exalts the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself. What is evil?

Everything that has its roots in weakness. Let the weak and the failures die! Help them to disappear! What is it that is more injurious than any vice? The pity felt by the strong for the dispossessed and the weak: Christianity."

Jean Péloueyre put down the book. These words moved into him as a kindling afternoon moves into a room whose shutters are thrown back. Indeed, he went instinctively to the window, gave up his friend's room to the sky-sent fire, then re-read the hateful passage. He shut his eyes, opened them again, and stared at his face in the glass. Poor queasy moor-dweller, "moor-hen," as they had called him at the academy, poor sad body in which adolescence had failed to accomplish its habitual miracle, pitiful game for the sacred well of Sparta! He saw himself at the age of five years in the nuns' school: despite the exalted position of the Péloueyre family, the prize seats and the highest marks always went to the boys who were curly-haired and handsome. He remembered the test in reading, and that although he had read aloud better than the rest, yet he had been ranked lowest. There were times when Jean wondered if his mother, who had died of consumption before he knew her, would have loved him. His father was fond of him as

a suffering reflection of himself, as his puny shadow in the world his slippered feet walked through, or that he knew as he lay outstretched in his alcove with its aroma of valerian and ether. Monsieur Jérôme's eldest sister, Jean's aunt, would doubtless have execrated the boy, but for her worship of her son, Fernand Cazenave, a man of substance, the president of the county council, with whom she lived in a neighbouring town: this devotion absorbed her to the point of blotting out the rest of the world, blinding her to it. Yet from time to time with a smile or a word she would draw Jean Péloueyre out of oblivion, calculating that this son of a shaky father, this poor being predestined for celibacy and a premature death, was the channel through which the Péloueyre fortune would flow to the ultimate profit of her son Fernand. In one glance Jean surveyed the desert of his life. His three years at the academy had been consumed in jealously unrevealed friendships: neither his comrade Daniel Trasis, nor the priest who taught him rhetoric, had perceived the dog-like hunger in his eyes.

Jean Péloueyre opened the volume of Nietzsche to another page. He devoured aphorism 260 of Beyond Good and Evil, the one which treats of two morals, a moral for slaves and another for masters. He gazed at

his face, which the burning sun could not make less yellow, and repeated the words of Nietzsche, filling himself with their meaning, hearing them rumble in him like a great October wind. For one moment he thought he saw, lying like an uprooted oak at his feet, his Faith. Was not his Faith lying there, prone in the torrid sun? No, no: the tree was still embracing him with its thousand branches. After this cyclone, Jean felt again in his heart the beloved shade, the mystery alive beneath that hardy and once more motionless foliage. But he discovered suddenly that to him religion had been above everything else a refuge. It had opened the night of its consolation to the ugly orphan. There on the altar stood One in the stead of the friends he had not had, and the Virgin had inherited the devotion he might have vowed to his mother in the flesh. All the confidences that stifled him were poured forth in the confessional or in mute prayer at twilight when the tenebrous vessel of the church gathers in what freshness remains in the world. At that moment the jar of his heart broke at invisible feet. If he had had Daniel's curly hair, that face which since its coming into the world women had never ceased to caress, would Jean Péloueyre have been one of a troop of old maids and serving girls? He was

of those slaves whom Nietzsche denounced; he could see in himself their base countenance; he bore in his face their inescapable condemnation; all his being was built for defeat—like his father, in fact, his father who was as devout as Jean, but knew more of theology and had even lately been a patient reader of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Jean was little concerned with doctrine; his religion was one of effusion, and he admired in his father's faith the primary fundament of reason. Nevertheless, he thought of that phrase his father loved to repeat: "Without my Faith, what would have become of me?" This Faith was however not strong enough to brave a cold in order to hear mass. On great feast days Monsieur Jérôme was always installed in the overheated sacristy from which, bundled up, he would follow the ceremony.

Jean went out. Again he walked and gesticulated between the blind walls and under the mute indulgence of the trees. Now and then he pretended to be relieved of the burden of his faith, and this cork which had held him afloat on the stream of life would suddenly be missed. Nothing left, nothing! He was thrilled by this destitution. School memories crowded to his lips: ". . . My ill is greater than my hope . . . O, Heaven, I

praise thee and thy perseverance. . . ." A little farther on he was demonstrating to the trees, the heaps of stone, and the walls that there were Masters among Christians, and that the Saints, the great Orders, the whole of the universal Church afforded a sublime example of the will to power.

Stirred by these thoughts, he came to himself only at the sound of his footsteps in the vestibule and at the moaning which set up on the first storey when his footsteps sounded. A sleepy, whining voice called Cadette, and the servant's slippers shuffled in the kitchen. The dog barked; shutters were flung back; Monsieur Jérôme's awakening roused the sluggish household. This was the hour when his eyes were swollen, his mouth was bitter, and his view of the world was darkened. Jean took refuge in the "company parlour", which was as cool as a cellar. Mouldy wallpaper hung down and uncovered the saltpetre rot on the walls. Not for human ears was the clock breaking time into bits. Jean sank deep into a stuffed chair. He looked into himself for the place where his faith was in pain and filled himself with anguish. A fly buzzed and settled down. A cock crowed; there was a brief trill from a bird; then the cock again. The clock sounded the half-hour: one cock; more cocks. Jean dozed

off, and slept until that so sweet hour when he slipped daily through the bystreets to the smallest door of the church and let himself into its perfumed darkness. Would he not keep this assignation—the only one ever made with hobble-gaited Jean Péloueyre? He did not go, but went instead into the garden where the sinking sun drew from him the words, "The heat will go down." White butterflies were beating the air. Cadette's grandson, standing barefoot in wooden shoes, was watering the lettuce plants—a handsome rascal whom the girls adored and whom Jean fled, ashamed to be his master, feeling that it was rather his puny person which should be in service to this young and triumphant god of the vegetable garden. Even from afar he dared not smile at him: with peasants, his timidity became paralysis. Many times he had tried to help the parish priest in his good work at the study classes, and always, gagged by shame, stupid, covered with ridicule, he had escaped home in the night.

Meanwhile Monsieur Jérôme was moving along the path bordered by twisted pear trees, mignonette, heliotrope and geraniums. Their perfumes could not make themselves known because of the vast round bouquet of a lime-tree, which was filling earth and sky with its

breath. Monsieur Jérôme dragged his feet. The end of his trouser leg was caught between ankle and slipper. His misshapen straw hat was edged with watered silk. Over his shoulders lay an old knitted tippet which had been forgotten by his sister. Jean recognized a volume of Montaigne in his hands. Like his religion, these essays doubtless furnished him with subterfuges to excuse, in the name of wisdom, his renunciation of conquest. Yes, Jean said to himself, this poor man gives names like stoicism and Christian resignation to the immense defeat of his life. Ah! but Jean felt himself clear-headed. Loving and pitying his father, how he despised him at that moment. The invalid began to complain: his neck was twitching; he was suffocating; he was going to be sick. Duberne of Hourtinat, a tenant farmer, had burst in upon him and demanded that a new room be built to house his newly married daughter's wedding cupboard. Where could he suffer in silence! Where could he die in peace! And to cap it all, the next day was Thursday, market day on the square, and it was also the recurrent day of invasion: his sister, Félicité Cazenave, and his nephew, would be masters in his house; at dawn the cursed animals on the market square would wake him; the Cazenave motor growling before

the door would announce the presence of the weekly plague; Aunt Félicité would force an entry into the kitchen and disregard her brother's diet in favour of her son's. And in the evening, those two would leave behind them Cadette weeping and her master suffocating.

Although he crawled abjectly in the face of the enemy, Monsieur Jérôme nourished a secret rancour. He had muttered so often that he would not leave the Cazenaves more than "a pup from his bitch," that on this day Jean paid no heed to his father's murmured words. "We are going to play them a trick, Jean, if only you do your part. But will you?" Jean smiled. He was a thousand leagues from the Cazenaves. His father stared at him and said, "You ought to think more about your clothes, at your age. You look dreadfully shabby, my poor scamp." Although Monsieur Jérôme had never before betrayed any interest in his dress, Jean asked no questions. He had no premonition of what was in preparation at this turning in his destiny. He had taken the Montaigne from his father's hands and was reading this sentence: "For my part, I sing the praise of a gliding, sombre and mute life." Ah, but their life was as gliding, sombre, and mute as anyone could wish! The

Péloueyres stared at the water in the pool, its surface wrinkled by a breath of wind and stirred by the tadpoles about a dead mole. Monsieur Jérôme thought he felt the evening damp and shuffled towards the house. Standing idly in the garden, Jean thrust his head through the half open postern that gave on the narrow street. Seeing his face, Cadette's grandson, who had been holding a girl pressed close to him, dropped the girl as if she had been a fruit.

Chapter ii

JEAN PÉLOUEYRE scarcely slept that night. His windows were open on the milky night, the night noisier than the day because of the croaking in the pools. But it was most of all the cocks, who crowed ceaselessly until dawn, when they finally wearied of hailing the obscure and deceitful light of the stars. Those of the town called to those of the farms, and from one to the next the responses came. "A cry repeated by a thousand sentinels." Jean lay awake, cradled by the hazy endless murmuring of the poet's line—*"C'est un cri répété par mille sentinelles. . . ."* The windows cut out of the heavens fragments of a sky devoured by stars. He got up on his bare feet, looked at the worlds, and called them by their names while he turned over and over in his mind yesterday's problem: had he adopted a metaphysic, or was it a system of ingenious consolations? Undoubtedly there were believers among the Masters. But had Chateaubriand ever hesitated to stake his eternity against a caress? How many times

had Barbey d'Aurevilly betrayed the Son of Man for a kiss? Did they not triumph accordingly as they betrayed their God?

At dawn the grievous squeals of the little pigs awoke Jean. Again, as on every Thursday, he refrained from opening the shutters lest he be seen by the market people. On the pavement close to his window, Madame Bouridays, the draper's wife, stopped Noémi d'Artiailh to ask her if she had already breakfasted. Jean stared gluttonously at the seventeen year old Noémi. Her head, dark and curly-haired as a Spanish angel, did not seem to belong on that thick-set body, but Jean adored the contrast of the firm, grossly-hewn young body and that seraphic face that made the ladies say Noémi d'Artiailh was as pretty as a picture. She might have been a squat Virgin painted by Raphael, and she stirred the best and the worst in Jean, moved him to the highest thoughts and the basest delights. Her neck and her soft breast were already gleaming with moisture. Unending lashes added to the chastity of her dark eyelids. Her face was still bathed in vague childhood, in the virginity of childish lips,—and suddenly one saw her strong boyish hands, and those calves which moved straight down into the tight laces of her shoes, where they had to be

called ankles. Jean Péloueyre was staring from a hiding-place at this angel: Cadette's grandson could look her in the face. Handsome lads, even of common birth, had the right of scrutiny of all girls. At high mass, when she walked up the nave and brushed past Jean's chair, he scarcely dared breathe in the air stirred by her calico dress with its odour of laundry soap and clean linen. Jean sighed and put on yesterday's shirt, which was also that of the day before. This body deserved no care: he washed, pouring the water out of a pot so squat in its cramped basin that the cover of the washstand could be shut down without breaking the pot. Under the lime-tree in the garden he did not repeat his morning prayer, but read a newspaper in such fashion that it hid his face from the eyes of Cadette's grandson. That rascal was whistling. A red carnation was stuck behind his ear, and he was as shiny and varnished as a young cock. About his indigo trousers he had wound a sash. Jean hated him vilely and was horrified by his hatred. He was not consoled by the reflection that this boy would turn into a hideous old peasant, since at that distant moment another boy, equally strong, equally lusty, would be watering the lettuce plants—just as there would be other butterflies beating white wings

as these were doing this morning. "O my soul, my soul," Jean Péloueyre said to himself; "you are even uglier this morning than my face."

He recognized, coming from the house, the piping voice of the parish priest. What was he cooking up at this hour which was not that of his daily visit? And how did he dare risk meeting Fernand Cazenave, who was notoriously enraged by the sight of a cassock? Hidden behind the lime-tree, Jean saw Fernand race by, as he always did during the five minutes before time to eat. His mother was panting after him. Her great body all legs, her spherical torso, her old Juno head set down upon her breasts—the whole of this powerful, worn out, badly geared machine served the beloved son as if by a finger upon some button he had set a mechanism in motion. The councillor was good enough to stop and wait for her to come up. He stood like a frowning deity sweating in alpaca, wiping with his handkerchief a dripping forehead and the moist interior of his flat straw hat. Behind his glasses his metallic eyes reflected nothing of the world. His mother marched through life before him to clear his path, breaking people as readily as branches. It was common gossip that she had said one day, "If Fernand marries, my daughter-in-law will

die." No daughter-in-law had taken the risk; indeed what girl would have agreed to curry and nourish this mature man, this man who, though he was in his fifties, was still accustomed to the coddling of a baby. The angelus rang out in the heat. Jean heard the councillor grumble: "Filthy bells!"

He did not slip in to midday dinner until his aunt and Fernand were already at table, tied into their napkins, looking down upon the others. Monsieur Jérôme came in late, round-backed and fearful, but with a gleam in his eye, and dared confess that the priest had delayed him. With bowed heads the Péloueyres awaited the storm which broke only when the roast had been served. Fernand was the first to be served, and with fork in air he looked enquiringly at his mother. Félicité sniffed at the meat, turned it over, and let fall her judgment: "Over-done." Together the pair pushed back their plates. Cadette came forward with the eyes of a chased hen and defended her lamb in a whining dialect —all of which created a needless furore, for the councillor ended by sating his hunger with the over-done meat. When he had had his fill, he begged his uncle's pardon for not going to greet him on his arrival, saying that he had seen a priest's hat in the entry: the Péloueyres

knew that the sight of a priest made him sick. With his eyes still on his plate, and in his expressionless voice, Monsieur Jérôme said, "He came to see me in order to talk about you, Jean. He wants to marry you off, you know." Fernand sneered, and said it was a joke. "Why not? Jean is nearly twenty-three." Then Fernand burst forth: what business was it of the priest's? What right had he to go poking his nose into family matters? Losing all sense of decency, he went so far as to wonder audibly if Jean was even "marriageable." A wink from his mother called the coarse fellow to order. "It would be an excellent thing for Jean to marry," she said. "This house needs a housekeeper. Of course, I must say that young women have strange notions, and Jérôme's diet will probably be interfered with." Fernand, being calm now, agreed. Naturally, Jean could found a family. But might not that make him unhappy? The dear child already had the habits and manias of an old bachelor. If Jean did marry, insinuated Aunt Félicité, Jérôme ought to arrange not to live with the young people. Of course that would be hard on him. And she reminded them of Jean's false start for the academy when, his seat in the train booked, his bags

ready, the carriage at the door, his father refused at the last minute to let him leave.

Perturbed, but unwilling to doubt that this marriage tale had been invented maliciously out of hand by his father, Jean sat thinking of that evening on the second of October when the creaking old landau stood in the rain, waiting to drive him across the Bazadais region to the house of piety where the children of the moors dream of hunting over their school books. There were strips of flowered paper pasted to his box which had been there when the box was his great-uncle's. Monsieur Jérôme had sobbed, pretended an attack, so cowardly was he in the face of separation. It was after this that the poor man began to demand silence about him, but it was a silence interrupted by the suffering little life of Jean in the house. Thus, Jean had studied with the parish priest until he was fifteen, and had gone to school only in time to be examined for his preparatory-school certificate. . . . What was this sudden fantastic notion of marrying him off? Jean thought of his father's strange words in the garden the night before. But why give it a thought? He repeated to himself that a Jean Péloueyre was not "marriageable." The Cazenaves were

fools to take this farce so tragically. Now they were insisting upon knowing the girl's name, but the coming of his hour of rest allowed Monsieur Jérôme to put off their question. Despite the heat, mother and son roamed through the garden while Jean, in anguish, spied upon their colloquies from the hall.

At the sound of the shifting gears which announced their departure, the invalid awoke, and as soon as Jean heard the shuffling slippers he walked into the odour of drugs that saturated the room. In this mephitic study and bedroom, it was revealed to him that they were thinking seriously of giving him a wife, a wife named Noémi d'Artiailh. The psyche-glass reflected Jean's body, drier than the heather on the burnt moors. "She will not have me," he stammered; and he trembled to hear these incredible words: "She has been approached and has indicated no unwillingness." The d'Artiailhs thought they were dreaming, could not believe in their great luck. But Jean shook his head, and the hands he stretched forth seemed to be waving away a mirage. A girl agreeing to come into his arms? Noémi of the high mass? Noémi whose eyes, like black flowers, he had never dared look at? The air stirred by her mysterious body when she moved up the nave floated over Jean's face

in the only kiss he had ever known. Meanwhile, his father was explaining his reason for this, which was the priest's reason. It was important that the Péloueyre family go on in order that nothing be left to aunt Félicité and Fernand Cazenave. Monsieur Jérôme added: "And when the priest wants something done, he wants it done." Jean smiled, then made a face. The corner of his lip trembled, and he said: "She would loathe me." His father did not dream of denying this: since he himself had never been loved, he did not imagine that his son might find this happiness. But he went with satisfaction through the list of Noémi's virtues, the virtues of this girl chosen by the priest from among them all to the edification of the parish. She belonged to the type which seeks no carnal joy in marriage; she was a woman who knew her duty, was submissive to God and to her husband, and would be one of those mothers still to be found whose simple ignorance is never invaded, despite frequent child-bearing. Monsieur Jérôme cleared his throat and softened a little. "If I knew you were properly married and safe from the Cazenaves, I could die in peace."

The priest was anxious to have it over with. Jean was to go the next day to call upon Noémi; she would be

looking for him after luncheon at the parish house, where Madame d'Artiailh would arrange to leave them alone together. Monsieur Jérôme was talking rapidly and his hands shook: he was exasperated by the endless discussion and by Jean's refusal to be convinced. Jean had lost his wits and did not know what to say. How shameful to be in such a state of terror! Was not this the moment when he should be escaping from the troop of slaves and playing the master? This was the great moment in which to knock off his chains and become a man. As his father was pressing him to come to a decision, he gave a vague nod of assent. Later, thinking of that instant in which his fate was decided, he confessed to himself that ten hastily read pages of Nietzsche were responsible for the decision. He slipped away, leaving Monsieur Jérôme stupefied by so easy a victory, and impatient to announce it at the parish house.

In the time he took going down the stairs, Jean had already habituated himself to the prodigy and was feeling himself imperceptibly less chaste. It had been revealed to this virgin that his virginity was perhaps not to be eternal. He dared summon up within him an image and stare boldly into its dark eyes. It all but made him faint. Suddenly Jean felt the need of a bath. As

often happens in the Gironde country, the Péloueyre bath tub was full of potatoes, which Cadette had to remove.

After dinner Jean walked through the village. He took great care not to gesticulate and not to talk to himself. Stiffly and formally he greeted every group that stood before a door. A sudden silence would fall as he came nearer, like the silence of frogs in a pool. But no laughter sounded. Finally, when he had passed the last houses of the village and was alone on the pallid road, lined with two black ranks of pines which blew upon him their steaming breath and, like the censers of a sylvan cathedral, sent forth perfume from their thousand pots of resin, he was able to laugh, shrug his shoulders, crack his fingers, and shout: "I am a Master, a Master, a Master!" and to repeat, stressing the cæsura in each line: *"By what secret springs—by what magic links —Has the sky brought forth—this great enchantment."*

Chapter iii

JEAN PÉLOUEYRE was afraid that an awkward silence might fall. The fear of silence led Madame d'Artiailh and the parish priest to skim over many subjects and dissipate them wildly: they might shortly have not a word more to say. Like a magnolia blossom dilated out of its vase, Noémi's dress overflowed her chair, and like the sultry perfume of those flowers which one is careful not to leave at night in one's room, Noémi's girlish aroma on this tropical July day impregnated the improverished parlour where God reigned on all the walls and on the mantelshelf. Jean turned not his head, but his eyes; he inspected Noémi, descended now from her pedestal; seen so close, she seemed almost as if under a microscope. He looked eagerly for flaws in this living, shimmering metal. There were dark spots at the wings of her nose; her skin, just where her throat emerged, seemed as if burned by an old stain of iodine. A word spoken by the priest brought a brief laugh, long enough for Jean to see in the pure hedge of her teeth a dulled, dubious canine. His inspection prevented the

great dark eyes from rising to meet his glance, and that might have been because he was looking at her precisely in order not to be looked at by her. Thank heaven the priest knew how to talk by himself and to preach ceaselessly. For all his round little person, there was nothing jovial about him. Despite his corpulence, an inner austerity shone forth. The farming people understood him little, but the village was fond of him, and under his guidance several of its souls had gone far and high towards the spiritual life. As sometimes happens, this kindly man possessed the earth. He was all suavity, all compunction, but never was his flexible will broken. He dissuaded the most beautiful girls from the Sunday dances and offered benignly stubborn opposition to the amorous enterprises of the village youths. No one knew that he had drawn back the postmistress from the extreme brink of adultery. It was he who had made up his mind it was not good that Jean Péloueyre live alone. This shepherd was anxious that the Péloueyre house never become the Cazenave house, that the wolf find no lodging in his sheepfold.

Never before had Jean observed how deeply women breathe: when she drew breath, Noémi's breast all but touched her chin. The priest had had enough of pre-

tence: he stood up, said the dear children probably had things they wished to say to one another, and invited Madame d'Artiailh to go into the garden and marvel at the way his plums were coming on.

And now that dim room seemed to be the scene of an entomological experiment, with its dark and fearful male enchanted by the marvellous female. Jean did not stir; he did not raise his eyes: henceforth movement was useless; he was the prisoner of the glance sent down upon him. The virgin took in with her eye this larva that was her fate. The handsome lad with multiple face, the dream companion of all young girls, he whose hard breast and strapping arms were the refuge of their sleepless nights—this young man vanished in the twilight of the parish house, melted and faded until he became no more than the invisible cricket she heard in the darkest corner of the room. She looked at her fate, knowing it inescapable: one does not refuse a Péloueyre. Noémi's parents were so far from imagining that their daughter might not wish this marriage, that they lived in anguish lest at the last moment Jean withdraw from it. Nor did Noémi dream of rebellion. For a quarter hour past, all that was to mean life to her had been sitting there, biting its nails, twisting uneasily

in its chair. He stood up, and he was even smaller than when seated. He spoke, stammered something she could not understand and which he repeated: "I am not worthy. . . ." She protested: "Oh, sir! . . ." He gave himself up to an outburst of humility, acknowledged that he could not possibly be loved, and begged to be allowed to love her. Words came to him; sentences assembled themselves. He had waited until he was twenty-three years old to tell his heart to a woman. He gesticulated as if he had been alone in an endeavour to paint the beauty of his soul. Indeed he was alone.

Noémi looked at the door and heard him unamazed. She had always been told about Jean Péloueyre that he was "a queer fish, a bit touched." He went on, and the door remained shut: nothing was alive in this parish house but the queer little man and his gestures. Noémi was becoming uneasy: a desire to weep strangled her. Jean was silent after a bit, and she grew afraid, as if she had been alone in a dark room with an invisible bat. When Madame d'Artiailh and the priest came back she flung her arms about her mother's neck, not thinking that this effusion could be mistaken for acquiescence. But already the priest was rubbing his cheek against Jean's. The ladies left by themselves in order not to

awaken the curiosity of the neighbours. Did Jean peer through the shutters at sharp skinny Madame d'Artiailh, walking with her skirt swaying off centre in the gait of a dog, and beside her Noémi's somewhat frayed dress that was never again to bell beautifully, Noémi with her head bowed liked a fading flower, a flower already cut?

This mutinous youth accustomed to burrow into his corner, his single care in life being not to be observed, was aghast and stupefied for days over the rumour that arose about him. Fate had drawn him out of his darkness; like a cantrap, Nietzsche's words had sent the walls of his cell crumbling, and he sat with his head in his shoulders and his eyes blinking, like some great night-bird brought forth into the sunlight. People about him changed, too: Monsieur Jérôme neglected his diet and his drugs, and took time out of his siesta to go as far as the sacristy to talk with the priest; the Cazenaves stopped coming on Thursdays and were heard from only in a thousand infamous rumours touching Jean Péloueyre's temperament and certain peculiarities which, if they were to be believed, rendered him unsuited to the married state.

From the depth of his humility Jean marvelled that

because of him the d'Artiailhs were envied. Everywhere people repeated that surely Noémi deserved her good fortune. This very old family was in high favour. Hard-working Monsieur d'Artiailh had failed at many things, and he did not blush for his post at the town hall. It was no secret that at Easter the d'Artiailhs had been obliged to give up their general servant. Jean Péloueyre looked at himself in the glass and no longer found himself so hideous. The parish priest went about everywhere saying that young Péloueyre might be a little unprepossessing, but he had a most distinguished mind. As they sat every evening on a sofa in the drawing-room and Jean listened to his own voice, Noémi's respectful silence persuaded him that, as the priest had said, what a decent girl prizes above all in her betrothed is a distinguished mind. As he had formerly let himself go in soliloquies when alone, so he now did before her, grimacing, gesticulating, quoting verses without a word to identify them, believing this beautiful girl, gathered together in her corner of the sofa, as indulgent as once the trees had seemed on the empty road. He let her deep into his secrets, and even went so far as to discourse to her of Nietzsche, who would probably oblige her to alter the foundations of her moral existence.

Noémi would dry her moist hands upon a tiny ball of linen and stare at the door behind which her parents were whispering. Heaven be praised, she could not hear what they were saying. The chatter concerning his future son-in-law worried old d'Artiailh: he had been cheated and robbed at every turn of his career, and he was convinced that this seeming reversal of the wheel of fortune hid a disaster. But Madame d'Artiailh maintained that the only basis for these calumnies was the malevolence of the Cazenaves and the distance which either religion or timidity had placed between women and Jean Péloueyre.

Eleven o'clock struck in the moonlight: Madame d'Artiailh, without a rap or cough, opened the door, hoping against hope that she might find the young pair in an attitude that would give her food for thought. She asked pardon for disturbing "the turtle-doves." "Curfew" had sounded, she said. Jean touched his lips to Noémi's hair and went off in the company of his shadow along the line of houses. His triumphant footfalls awoke the watchdogs, and the moon forbade them to go to sleep again. Thus even at night he filled the village with sound. What was curious was that he felt no longer that emotion which overcame him when at

the high mass Noémi would part the air with her freshly ironed dress. He shook himself in order not to think of the September night when she would be delivered up to him. That night was never to come: a war was to break out, some one was to die, the earth was to quake. . . .

In her long night-dress Noémi was saying her prayers under the stars. Her bare feet loved the cold stone. She offered her soft breast to the commiseration of the night. She did not brush away the tear that rolled down within reach of her tongue, but drank it. The trembling of the lime-tree and its perfume rejoined the milky way. Over this skyey road her slightly mad dreams were never again to wander. The crickets crackling on the edge of their hole brought to mind her master. One evening, stretched on her sheets and delivered up to the hot night, she sobbed very quietly, then moaned a long time, looking pitifully at her chaste, unsullied body, burning with life but cool as a plant. What would the cricket do to it? She knew he had the right to caress it, and that there was a terrible and mysterious caress after which a child would be born, a dark and puny little Péloueyre. She was to have that cricket all her life, and

have him in her bed. While she continued to sob, her mother appeared. (Oh, beribboned camisole! Oh, scant-haired braid!) The child pretended to be horrified by the thought of marriage and to wish to become a Carmelite nun. Madame d'Artiailh said not a word, but took the girl in her arms and held her until the sobs came less frequently. Then she assured her that in these matters she had to follow the guidance of her spiritual director. Now, had not the priest himself elected the path of marriage for her? Noémi, her little house-wife soul full of tenderness and piety, was incapable of argument. She read no novels; she was an obedient servant in her parents' house. She was told that there was no need that a man be handsome; that marriage produced love as the peachtree a peach. But to convince her it would have been enough to repeat the axiom: *One does not refuse a Péloueyre!* One does not refuse a Péloueyre; one does not refuse tithe farms, fields, flocks of sheep, household silver, the linens of generations carefully piled in wide, high, aromatic cupboards; alliance with the best that is to be found on the moors. One does not refuse a Péloueyre.

Chapter iv

THE earth did not quake; there were no signs in the sky, and the dawn of that Tuesday in September sent a soft gleam over the earth. They had to waken Jean Péloueyre, whose slumber had been deep. The tiles in the entry and the stone threshold of the house disappeared under a carpet of holly, laurel, and magnolia leaves. All the odours of the house were swept away by the aroma of the trampled greenery. The maids of honour whispered and remained standing because of their gowns. The public room of the *Red Horse Inn* was festooned with paper garlands. The ten o'clock train brought in the wedding repast, all prepared, from the county seat. Victorias brought families, gloved in white, over all the roads. The sun played upon the furry top hats of the gentlemen whose "swallow-tails" were the amazement of the peasantry.

Monsieur Jérôme unmasked his batteries: he would remain abed. This was his fashion of ignoring all the funerals and weddings of his family. When these sol-

emn gatherings were collected, he always took a capsule of chloral and drew his bed-curtains. People recollected that when his wife was dying he had a bed made up for himself at the top of the house and lay there with his face to the wall until he was assured that the last shovelful of earth had covered the coffin and the train had borne away the last of the guests. On the day of his son's marriage he would not permit Cadette to throw back the shutters when Jean Péloueyre, green of the face and reduced to nothing in his evening dress, asked his blessing.

Terrible day! All of Jean Péloueyre's shame overwhelmed him anew. Though the wedding procession moved into the church in a tumult of bells, his keen hunter's ear lost not a hint of the pitying murmurs that arose from the staring crowd. He heard a young man say as they passed, "What a shame!" and he saw girls laughing aloud as they gazed from the chairs on which they stood. Between the blazing altar and the excited onlookers he swayed, clinging with his hands to the plush of the *prie-Dieu*. He dared not look, but he felt trembling beside him the mysterious body of a woman. The priest read on and on. Ah! if only his reading could go on unendingly. But the sun, sifting now

through the church windows and lying like confetti over the old tiles, would sink—and then would open the reign of the all-revealing night.

The heat had ruined the wedding dinner: one of the lobsters smelled high. The cone of ice had become a thick pool of yellow cream. Rather than flee, the flies would have preferred to be crushed straightway on the cakes. The stout women suffered without recourse in their harness while perspiration stained their frocks. Only from the children's table did gay cries arise. Out of the depths of his abyss Jean gazed anxiously at the faces about him: what was Fernand Cazenave whispering to Noémi's uncle? Like a deaf mute, Jean guessed the sentence from the movement of his lips: "If they had listened to us, this misfortune would have been averted; but in our position intervention was a very delicate affair."

Chapter v

THE bedroom in the family house at Arcachon was furnished in artificial bamboo. There was no curtain to conceal the vessels standing beneath the toilet table, and dead mosquitoes soiled the paper on the wall. Through the open window came the seaport odour of fish, seaweed and salt. The hum of a motor died in the direction of the pass. On the cretonne curtains two guardian angels were veiling their abashed faces. Jean Péloueyre had to battle a long time, first with his own mirror and then with a dead body. Towards dawn a feeble moan marked the end of a struggle which had lasted six hours. Bathed in sweat, Jean dared not stir. He lay more hideous than a worm beside the ultimately abandoned corpse.

She lay like a sleeping martyr. Her hair was glued to her forehead, like the hair of a woman dying; her face, thinner than ever, was the face of a whipped child. Her hands crossed over her innocent breast clutched a slightly discoloured scapulary and a couple of blessed

medals. Her feet should have been kissed, her tender body raised without waking and carried thus out to sea and delivered up to the chaste foam.

Chapter vi

ALTHOUGH they had taken a return ticket which should have kept them three weeks from home, they were back ten days later and settled in the Péloueyre house. The village buzzed with excitement and the Cazenaves, not waiting for their Thursday, came running to scrutinize Noémi's face. But the young woman showed nothing that was in her heart. Besides, the priest and the d'Artiailhs stopped all gossip: the turtle-doves, they said, had preferred the tranquillity of home to the tumult of hotels and railway stations. When the high mass was ended Noémi, in bright array, shook hands and smiled. She laughed; she was therefore happy. Yet it was astonishing how assiduously she heard mass every day. There were ladies of the parish who observed that well after the communion her hands continued to cover her thinned and docile face. From this wan appearance it was judged she must be with child, and aunt Félicité turned up one day to measure with a furtive eye the young woman's waist. But a secret colloquy with

Cadette—the ancient augur who presided over the laundry tub—reassured her. Thereafter she thought it politic to stay away, not wishing, as she put it, to feign to approve by her presence a monstrous union cooked up by the priesthood. She delayed her return until there should appear the first signs of an inevitable drama.

Meanwhile, Monsieur Jérôme was amazed to observe that his daughter-in-law was nursing him with the passion of a sister of St. Vincent de Paul. She brought each remedy to him at its prescribed hour, and with gentle authority insisted upon silence during his siesta. Jean, much as before, slipped out of his father's house and glided along the walls of the unfrequented bystreets. He would stand with cocked gun behind a pine or on the edge of a field of millet and watch for magpies, wishing that each minute might be prolonged forever and that evening would never fall. But already the shadows were of swifter birth. Stirred by the equinoctial winds, the pines took up in a muted tone the air taught them by the Atlantic on the sands of Mimizan and Biscarosse. Among the thickets of brake arose the huts of heather from which, in the month of October, the dwellers of this region shot ring-doves. The odour of baking rye bread perfumed the twilight around

all the tithe farms. While the sun was sinking Jean Péloueyre would bring down the tardiest larks, and then, as he moved gradually closer to the village, his step would fall more and more reluctantly. One moment more! One more moment before Noémi would be forced to suffer his presence in the house. He would come stealthily into the entry: she would be there watching for him with lamp held high, would come forward with a smile of welcome, present her forehead to his kiss, weigh the game-bag in her hand, and in brief act as a spouse should who is happy over the return of her beloved. But she played her part only for a few minutes and could never flatter herself that she deluded him. During the evening meal Monsieur Jérôme would relieve them of silence: since he had now a young nurse to serve him he never tired of describing his sensations. And as she took it upon herself to receive the tenant farmers, Noémi had much to tell him about the estate. Monsieur Jérôme was admiringly astounded that this little girl should be the only person in the house capable of verifying the steward's accounts and overseeing the sale of the timber for mine props. He credited her, too, with the five pounds he had put on since the marriage of his son.

When they had eaten, Monsieur Jérôme would doze off, his feet on the andirons. Then, without possibility of escape, husband and wife would be alone together. Jean would sit far out of the circle of lamp-light, scarcely breathing, and trying to blot himself out in the shadow. But nothing could spirit him away: there he was; and nothing could prevent Cadette's bringing in their candlesticks at ten o'clock. Oh, that terrible march up the stairs to their chamber. The pluvial autumn soughed on the tiles. A cross wind cracked whip-like. The rumbling of a farm cart died away. Kneeling beside the dreadful bed, Noémi spoke the words of her prayer in a half audible voice: "Prostrate before Thee, O, Lord, I thank Thee for having given me a heart able to know Thee and to love Thee. . . ." In the darkness Jean Péloueyre divined the stiffening of the adored body, and withdrew as far away from it as he could. There were times when Noémi, putting forth a hand towards his face, now less hideous because invisible, felt hot tears upon it. At such times, filled with pity and remorse, and, as in the arena a Christian virgin ran towards the savage lion, with eyes shut and teeth clenched, she would take the unhappy man in her arms.

Chapter vii

HIS daily shooting gave Jean a pretext to remain all day away from her whom his very presence was murdering. He would get out of bed so silently that Noémi never awoke. When she opened her eyes he was already far away: a cart had carried him off over the muddy roads. He would unharness at some farm, hide in the vicinity of a hut, and whistle with fear lest a flight of ring-doves come into view. Cadette's grandson would shout that he might make ready, and the chase would begin: long hours of mist and dream, cradled by the bells of the flock, the calling voices of the shepherds, and the croaking in the marshes. Four o'clock would see the end of the shooting, and thereafter, in order to arrive home as late as possible, Jean would slip into the church. He did not pray there; he only bled before some one. Often tears would come; it would seem to him that his head was resting on some one's knees. Then Jean would fling upon the kitchen table his slate-coloured birds, their throats still swollen. His boots would

smoke before the hearth, and he would feel upon his hand the moist tongue of their bitch. Cadette would ladle out her soup, and behind her Jean would walk into the other room. And Noémi would say, "I did not know you were already back;" or, "Aren't you going to wash your hands?"

At that, he would go up to his room where the shutters had not yet been closed and where a lantern lit up the rain-soaked path. Jean would wash his hands without being able to get his nails clean, and would hide them under the table in fear that Noémi see them. He would look at her unobserved: how white her ears were! She would show no appetite, and he would insist awkwardly that she take a second helping of lamb. "But I am not hungry, I tell you." A docile smile, sometimes even a pouting kiss, would ask forgiveness for her brief impatience. She would look her husband straight in the face as a dying woman who believes in heaven might stare straight into the face of death. But the smile would cling to her lips as if she were trying to delude some one who was himself near death. It was he, he, Jean Péloueyre, who was bruising those eyes, draining the colour out of those ears, those lips, those cheeks: it was enough that he was there for him to drain away this

young life. And undone so, she was to him most dear. What victim was ever so beloved of her executioner?

Monsieur Jérôme alone was blooming. To this kindly man, all suffering was invisible that was not his own. They were stupefied to hear him proclaim happily that his health was greatly improved. The asthma was allowing him to breathe. He was able to doze until daylight without the aid of a sleeping powder. His refusal to see Dr. Pieuchon, whose son had been spitting blood and was being treated by the father, had brought him luck, he declared. For fear of contagion, Monsieur Jérôme had ceased to receive his old comrade. He swore that his daughter-in-law alone sufficed, and that her experience was greater than that of the doctors. Nothing was too offensive for her, not even things touching the wardrobe. She was able to give savour to the most insipid diet. Orange or lemon juice, at times a finger of old brandy, took the place of forbidden condiments and stimulated an appetite which Monsieur Jérôme asserted had been lost for fifteen years. After several false starts, Noémi took to aiding her father-in-law's digestion by reading aloud to him. She was tireless, never stopped, seemed not to perceive the regular breathing which preluded Monsieur Jérôme's nap. The clock struck: one

hour less to shudder with repugnance in the nuptial chamber, to spy upon the stirrings of the frightful body stretched beside her own, feigning, through pity for her, to be asleep. Now and then the contact of a leg awoke her, and she would draw all her length along the extreme edge of the bed against the wall; or a slight touch would make her shiver, and he, thinking her asleep, would venture a furtive caress. Then it would be her turn to pretend sleep for fear that Jean Péloueyre be tempted farther.

Chapter viii

NEVER did there come between them those disputes which separate lovers. They knew one another to be too mortally wounded to strike blows: the least offence would have been envenomed, have been incurable. Each was careful not to touch the other's wound. Their gestures were calculated to allay their suffering. When Noémi undressed he would look the other way, and he never went into the dressing room while she washed. He acquired habits of cleanliness, sent for Lubin water with which he inundated himself: shivering, he began to tub. Jean thought only himself guilty; she hated herself for that she was not a wife according to God. Never did they exchange so much as a mute reproach, but in a glance they would ask one another's forgiveness. They decided to say their prayers together: enemies in the flesh, they were united in this nightly supplication; their voices, at least, could commingle. Side by side and separated, they were joined in infinity.

One morning, having met by chance at the bedside

of an old invalid, they grasped avidly at this bond, and thereafter, once each week, they made the round of the sick and infirm together, each attributing the merit to the other. Except on this errand, Noémi fled Jean, or rather Noémi's body fled Jean's body, and Jean fled Noémi's repugnance. In vain did she try to overcome this repulsion in her flesh. One dreary November day she who hated walking forced herself to go with Jean on the moor and out as far as the deserted marshes where the silence is so deep that on the eve of a storm the Atlantic can be heard pounding on the sands. The blue-eyed gentians were in flower. She marched on ahead like a person escaping, while he followed far behind. The shepherds of the Béarn who were the forbears of Jean Péloueyre and had the right of pasturage in this desert, had dug here, many centuries before, a well for their flocks. At the muddy mouth of this well husband and wife stood together, and Jean thought of those old shepherds who are touched by the mysterious disease of the moor and are found at the bottom of a well, or buried head downward in the slime of a lagoon. Oh! he too, he too could have wished to embrace this miserly earth that had kneaded him in its image, and have ended his life stifled by its kiss.

Chapter ix

FREQUENTLY a visit from the parish priest would interrupt the reading. He would call Noémi "my child" and accept a glass of brandy, but he seemed no longer able to entertain with Monsieur Jérôme their old theological colloquies, nor to divert him with clerical tales. Before this judge, each of them put on his mask, looked out through expressionless eyes, and felt his soul spied upon. The time was past when the priest would talk freely on and on to his heart's content: all that he said now seemed to tend towards some secret end. He would stretch forth his short swollen legs to the fire, and, in the silence which followed, cast vivid and instantly veiled glances in the direction of Noémi and her father-in-law. Less peremptory, less sure of himself, it was long now since he had told those stories he loved to tell of his debates with one free-thinker or another, in which the favourite recurrent phrase was: "I answered him, *triumphantly, I may say. . . .*" Monsieur Jérôme remarked privately that he had not seen the priest so preoccupied

since the time when the former mayor attempted to force the Church to ring its bells on the occasion of civil burials, and to obtain possession of the hearse that belonged to the churchwardens.

The priest was anxious that Jean take up again the local history he had begun with so much enthusiasm and given up a year before. Jean maintained that the essential records were not to be had. In truth he was intellectually short-winded, had never finished any study. The first few pages of his books were covered with scrawled notes; the rest were not even cut. A perpetual need to walk in order to reflect at his ease kept him from his desk. One evening, after Monsieur Jérôme had retired, the priest returned obstinately to the charge. Jean declared that it was impossible for him to go on until he had consulted certain special works in the National Library—and it went without saying that he could scarcely undertake the journey to Paris. "And why not, my dear child? Why should you not go to Paris?" The priest asked this question in a low voice, playing meanwhile with the fringe of his sash and looking steadily into the fire. A weak voice murmured, "I don't want Jean to leave me." But the priest insisted: it was a sin not to cultivate one's talent. Jean, who was unable to

direct the study club or take charge of the charitable work of the parish, had no right to remain idle. The holy man elaborated this theme. And the sad voice spoke again with a great effort: "If Jean goes, I shall go with him." The priest shook his head: Noémi had become indispensable to the invalid. After all, their separation would be brief, a few weeks only, or a few months. Noémi had not the strength to continue her protest. Nothing further was said until the priest had put on his wadded great-coat and overshoes. Jean wrapped a cape about him, lighted a lantern, and preceded his guest out of the house.

The rain and the short days of December allowed the couple no chance to avoid one another, except when Jean was out shooting woodcock, and even then the twilight brought him home at four o'clock. One crackling fire, a single lighted lamp, brought together these enemies in the flesh. About the house they heard the swish of the sleep-inducing rain. Every winter Monsieur Jérôme had twinges of pain in his left shoulder, and he lay now whimpering. But Noémi was getting better. Dutifully, she spoke to Jean every day against the proposed journey; she had promised heaven to try in every way to keep

him beside her. This supplication made it impossible for the unhappy fellow to remain undecided; and while it seemed to hold him back, it actually forced him to leave. He would raise towards her his whipped-dog eyes and cry, "I must leave, Noémi." She would protest; but when he pretended to waver, far from pursuing her advantage, she would say no more. As for Monsieur Jérôme, although he was always quoting the line of verse that goes: *Absence is the greatest of ills*, he was secretly enchanted by the thought of being left alone with his daughter-in-law. What, in the face of this complicity, could the unhappy boy do? Indeed, at the bottom of his heart he favoured their verdict of exile. Except for a pilgrimage to Lourdes and his nights of love at Arcachon, he had never left his refuge. The thought of diving alone into the crowds of Paris was to him like sinking forever to the bottom of a human ocean more dreadful than the Atlantic. But too many hearts were urging him towards the abyss. It was finally decided that he leave in the second week of February. Long before time, Noemi busied herself with his clothes and his box. Jean was still at home when a taste for food came back to her. On a snowy afternoon she threw balls at Cadette's grandson,

while Jean looked on from a first storey window. He was lucidly aware that he was witnessing a resurrection. As the countryside was freeing itself of winter, so this young woman was freeing herself from him: he was fleeing her in order that she bloom again.

Lowering the soiled window of the carriage, Jean looked long and anxiously for the flutter of Noémi's handkerchief. How it fluttered, that signal of farewell and of joy! During the last week she had intoxicated the traveller with feigned tenderness, and her ardour had provoked him to murmur, one night when she seemed actually to be alive under his breath, "Suppose I were to stay, Noémi." Though it was in darkness, and although she answered only by a stifled exclamation, he divined her terror, her horror, and could not refrain from adding, "Don't worry; I intend to go." Never otherwise did be betray that he was not deceived. She turned towards the wall, and he heard her weep.

Jean watched the procession of the familiar pines through which his little train moved. There was the forest in which he had missed a woodcock. The railway paralleled a road he had so often driven over. That farm house crouching in the smoke and mist on the edge of a bare field, hugging close its oven and stable and well, he

greeted by name; he knew its owner. Then a new train carried him off over moors on which he had never shot. At Langon he said farewell to the last pines as to friends who had gone part way with him, as far as they could, and now stopped to give him the blessing of their outstretched branches.

Chapter x

HE put up at the first hotel he saw on the Quai Voltaire. In the morning he looked out at the rain that poured upon the Seine, which he had not yet dared cross. Towards noon he slipped into the café in the Orléans railway station and mused there in the rumbling of the trains that were carrying blessed travellers to his southwestern France. Not daring to linger after luncheon without ordering something, he followed his white wine by two liqueurs, and his restless mind roamed the absolute. His tics and fragmentary words brought occasional smiles to the faces of the waiters and of his neighbours, but in general, hidden as he was between a column and the door, he remained unnoticed. He read every line of the newspapers down to the advertisements: murder, suicide, dramas of jealousy and madness—all was grist to the mill of Jean Péloueyre, as he sat gorging himself with the ills of the universe. After dinner he bought a ticket that allowed him access to the railway platforms: there he sought out the train to Irun, on the Spanish

frontier, whose wide windows would reflect, the next morning, his monotonous moors. He had calculated that this train passed less than fifty miles as the crow flies from the Péloueyre house. He put his hand on the side of the carriage, and he looked, when the train started, like a man who is watching the irretrievable flight of half his soul. He went back to his table in the café. An orchestra was playing, and Jean subjected himself to the point of despair to the all-powerful influence of music over his heart. The music brought inescapably before his eyes a vision of Noémi. He travelled in thought over this body which he had dared look at only when it was asleep. While it slumbered in the long September nights, and moonlight flooded the bed, the sad faun had learned to know this body more intimately than if, oh, happy lover! he had possessed it in their mutual delirium. He had never held more than a corpse in his arms, but he had really penetrated it with his eyes. It may be that the woman we know best is she who has not loved us. At this hour Noémi was asleep in the vast cold room, blessedly asleep, delivered of a repulsive presence, languorous in the wide warmth of the deserted bed. He felt, across the distance, the joy of his beloved, the joy because he was not now stretched beside her. With his

head in his hands Jean worked himself into a state of anger: he would go back again, teach this woman her place, possess her though she die of it! He would put her to his own uses. . . . And then there arose within him Noémi, mute, submissive, soft and heavy of breast like a tree holding out its fruit. He remembered her acquiescence in a death of horror without one cry. . . . He paid for what he had drunk, walked along the quay to his hotel, and fumbled his clothes off his body in the darkness so that he might not see his image in the glass.

Every three days a letter was brought with his morning chocolate. Sometimes it remained unopened until evening. What did those hypocritical wishes for his return matter to him! Jean's single pleasure was to think that on this paper Noémi's hand had rested, that the nail of her little finger had creased that line under each word. Towards the end of March he seemed to feel some sincerity in her appeal: ". . . I am sure you do not believe in my desire to see you again. You do not know your wife very well. . . ." And she wrote: "I long for you to come back." Jean crumpled up her letter and read the one from his father which had come in the same post: ". . . You will find Noémi changed to her advantage. She has grown fatter and looks superb. She takes

care of me and pampers me with such good nature that I forget to thank her. The Cazenaves never come any more, but I know they imagine there is trouble between you two. Let them talk. I am getting on splendidly—not like Pieuchon's son, who cannot go out except driving and is said to be dying, despite the new doctor from B—— who is trying to cure him by giving him iodine diluted in water. The young give out before the old. . . ."

With the coming of the first fine spring days Jean finally dared cross the bridge. In a golden twilight he looked down upon the Seine, and his hands touching the cool stone parapet caressed it as if it were alive. At that moment a voice behind him whispered. It called him "darling." It asked him to come. Near his face was another, bloodless under its paint. A swollen and nailless hand was reaching for his hand. He took flight and stopped only when, a little out of breath, he had reached the gateways of the Louvre. Even from such creatures he had never dared expect an appeal. If not Noémi, another woman? For the first time he sought to enjoy in thought an accomplice who, however little blessed, might at any rate be indifferent, devoid of repugnance. But a so impoverished happiness was to him inconceiv-

able; he was struck by the bitter knowledge of this height of misfortune, and it brought back his anger. Why not? Why not give himself up this evening to the annihilation of this docility and indulgence? Are these dispensers of caresses put into the world for any other men than Péloueyres? He saw the evening sky tremble in the fountains of the Tuileries Gardens; children gathered round to watch while he gesticulated. He ran from them round-backed, walked around the Place de la Concorde, reached the rue Royal, and, as it was eight o'clock and time to dine, dared go through the door of a celebrated café.

Crouching near the door and opposite the bar where, as at a mahogany trough, a row of birds perched, he observed with a thrill that here his appearance astonished neither the females nor the black-garbed, fat waiters,—those sewer rats of the expensive restaurants. This gleaming intestine drew far too many savages from the Americas, far too many farmers and provincial notaries, to find anything amazing in a Jean Péloueyre. The Vouvray coloured his cheeks and he smiled at the animals lined up before the mahogany trough. A fleshy blonde slipped down from her stool, asked for a light, drank out of his glass, whispered a promise of bliss for

one hundred francs, and went back to her perch of expectancy. Despite the old gentleman at the next table, who advised him to wait until the closing hour, "because those who are left make you a better price," Jean paid for his Vouvray and was joined by the woman on the pavement outside. She hailed a taxi and they drove to a little street behind the Madeleine. This hotel was without a vestibule, the staircase rising almost from the pavement as if to exhale its filth more easily.

A sound of hairpins on marble awoke Jean out of his lethargy. He saw a pair of arms extravagantly great at the place where they were attached to the shoulders. Pink favours prettified the quivering flesh. She called him her darling, while with infinite care she drew off stockings of vegetable silk. This haste to give herself, this consent, this submissiveness without distaste, pierced Jean with a pain greater than when Noémi said with all her being, No! In amazement the woman saw Jean throw a note on the table; and before she could raise her hand he was out of the door, running through the street like a thief. Out on the boulevards, caught in their swarm, he savoured the beatitude of a great peril conjured away. The bare chestnut trees of the Champs Elysées invited him. He sat down on an empty bench,

breathless, resting, coughing a little. He saw the truncated moon whose light was eclipsed by the arc-lamps of the wide avenue, and he thought of it spreading its tranquil glow over the flock of dark peaks between the Pyrenees and the ocean. He was no longer suffering: all within him was pure. He was thrilled by his spotless misery. Noémi and Jean would love one another on a day of unending summer, and he savoured in advance the concord of their glorified flesh. O, light in which their immortal bodies, their incorruptible flesh, will call to one another. Jean said aloud: "There are no Masters. We are all born slaves, and we become your freedmen, O, Lord." A police officer who had approached him looked at him a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Every afternoon Jean went to sit on the pavement of the Café de la Paix, on the brink of the sad river of faces. Secret diseases, drink, or drugs had re-kneaded into he knew not what hideous resemblance these thousands of faces which had once been the faces of children. Jean became interested in the plying of their trade by the prostitutes, and watched this flock of skinny she-wolves. He played at guessing for the satisfaction of what vice this monocled gentleman with the flabby nether lip was

hunting. He sought avidly a single face that bore the mark of the dominators, the masters, only one, which he was ready to follow. But the eyes he saw were distraught; the hands shook; unnatural longings sullied the faces he scrutinized unperceived. And even had this Master existed, would he have been immortal? Jean Péloueyre, gesticulating at the café table as he was used to do along the garden-walls of a village street, quoted to himself Pascal's phrase upon the end of the most beautiful life on earth. We always lose the game! We always lose! O, thou brain softened by Nietzsche! . . .

Young men seated near by were nudging one another. A woman sitting with them called out to Jean. He trembled, threw a coin on the table, and fled while the woman cried out, "The fellow is off his chump." He slipped into the crowd and trotted like a rat along the shop windows, sketching mentally an essay on The Will to Power and Saintliness. From time to time he caught a glimpse of himself in a shop mirror and could not believe this was he. The bad food he had been eating had thinned and shrunken him more than ever. The dust of Paris irritated his throat. Although he should have given up cigarettes, he was smoking more than ever before, and he coughed and spat constantly. He would

grow dizzy and lean against the lamp-posts. He preferred going without food to the burning in the stomach which this food induced. Perhaps, he thought, I shall be picked up one day in the gutter like a dead cat. Noémi would then be free. These thoughts came to him in the cinema where he had finally sought refuge, drawn less by the screen than by the fragmentary music. Frequently the feverish fellow, dying with weariness, would go into a bathing establishment. There, a cloth curtain veiled the light; water dripped from the swan's-neck spouts, and one forgot one's body was alive. Jean hunted out these poor shelters only because for a long time the sole church he knew in Paris was the Madeleine, the single church that stood between his hotel and the Café de la Paix. But one day, in the course of an aimless stroll, he came upon the church of St. Roch, and thereafter its tenebrous chapel became his daily harbour. There he inhaled again the odour of his native church, as distinguishable in this coign of the immense city as in the obscure village. Not once did he go into the National Library.

He might perhaps have gone on this way until death, if one morning a letter from the priest had not called him back to his home. It was an insistent letter, even

though the news it brought of his father and his wife were good. With pain in his heart, Jean got into the express train he had so often felt move out under his hand and roll smoothly and then more rapidly towards the southwest—that car which bore the name, Irun.

Chapter xi

NO event in especial had determined the parish priest to call Jean home. He had decided to do it after a confession in the course of which Noémi had merely avowed her venial errors as on every Saturday. But she had asked for the spiritual support of her confessor against temptations and worries whose nature she had not divulged.

When Jean left she was at first in that state of contented lassitude that convalescents go through. Solitude was a continuous pleasure to her; she was blissfully content to lie in languor. Incapable of self-analysis as she was, she yet felt herself changed: her life was once more that of a maiden, but she knew in her flesh that she was not a maiden. Distaste had forbidden her to observe in herself the blossoming of womanhood; but this stranger within demanded a mysterious satisfaction. She was disturbed at the vanishing of the peace she had known before this man possessed her, but incapable of discerning the struggle between her still sleeping heart

and her half-awakened body. Certainly, she had felt with horror the disruption of her being, but the faithful flesh forgets nothing that it has undergone. Since the young wife had never opened another book than her prayer book, and since her position as a daughter of good but impoverished family had removed her from all intimate company, no fiction and no confidante were present to enlighten her concerning this secret inner exigency. But destiny revealed to her a face.

The March sun was gleaming in the pools of rain on the village square. Monsieur Jérôme's siesta had cast such a spell upon the house that not a chair creaked. Like all the women of the village, Noémi was seated on the ground floor sewing at a window whose shutters were half closed. She heard a sound of wheels and saw an English gig stop a few paces away. A young man, the reins in his hands, was looking around as if for guidance, but the square was deserted. Noémi was curious. She pushed open the shutters, and at that moment the young man turned towards her, took off his hat, and asked where Dr. Pieuchon lived. When Noémi had answered, he bowed, flicked his horse with the whip, and was gone. Noémi went back to her sewing. All day long she drew

out her thread, her mind vague, unconscious of the face now imprinted upon it.

The next day at the same hour the unknown man passed again, but without stopping. Yet he pulled up his horse a little as he reached the Péloueyre house, and his glance sought the young woman behind the joined shutters. On the chance that she might be there, he bowed. That evening, at supper, Monsieur Jérôme said he had been told by the priest that Pieuchon's son was growing worse and that his father had called in a young doctor from the township seat. It appeared that the new doctor's method was highly thought of: he treated tuberculosis by "massive doses" of iodine; the sick boy was forced, they said, to swallow hundreds of drops diluted in water. Monsieur Jérôme doubted that the Pieuchon boy's stomach could hold the stuff.

Every day the tilbury went by, and every day it slowed down before the Péloueyre house; but Noémi never opened the shutters. The young doctor would bow to the strip of shadow behind which breathed the invisible young woman. The village was interested in this iodine cure, and all the consumptives of the township were using it. People said that Pieuchon's son was getting

better. Spring came early that year; a mild March-end was drawing the world out of its torpor. An evening came when Noémi could undress with her window open. She leant her elbows on the sill, happy, melancholy, and with no desire to sleep. Before her spread the wide night in which, by some secret enchantment, there was suddenly revealed the face that had imprinted itself upon her memory. For the first time she let her thoughts dwell upon it; since the stranger had been greeting her day after day without so much as seeing her, would it not be proper, the next day, to open the shutters and return his bow? When she had decided to do this she felt an emotion so sweet that she hesitated a moment before getting into bed. One by one his features came back to her: black curly hair seen only in that instant when he raised his hat; full red lips under a short moustache; tweeds with a fountain pen clip gleaming at the breast pocket; no necktie, but a shirt of white tussor open at the throat.

Noémi was all instinct, but she was trained in the examination of her conscience: instantly she was startled. Her first alarm came, however, during her prayer because she had to begin each verse again. Between God

and her a dark face smiled. She was obsessed by it as she lay abed, and when she awoke, still clouded by dreams, she thought at first that she was going to see it. That morning at mass her fingers never left her face. And during the siesta hour, when the tilbury rolled past the Péloueyre house, all the shutters were hermetically closed.

It was at this time that the exile in Paris received those letters which astonished him, those in which Noémi said, "I long for you to come back." Meanwhile she was seated in the darkened room, waiting for the gig to pass before she flung open the shutters and took up her work. One afternoon she said to herself that scruple too was a sin. "I am being silly," she thought. Once and for all she would appear at the window and acknowledge the stranger's greeting. She imagined she heard a sound of wheels, and already her hand was hesitating on the latch; but for the first time in a fortnight the gig did not come by.

When the hour came for Monsieur Jérôme to take his valerian drops, Noémi went upstairs, and she could not refrain from telling him that the new doctor had not gone to the Pieuchons' that day. Monsieur Jérôme knew it: the Pieuchon boy had had a relapse the night before,

and could no longer take the iodine. The priest had reported that he was vomiting basinfuls of blood. Spring is a dangerous season for consumptives. It was said that Dr. Pieuchon was speaking very harshly of his colleague, who would doubtless not dare come back here again. Noémi interviewed a tenant farmer, and helped Cadette fold the linen. At six o'clock she went to vespers, and afterwards, as usual, to see her parents. But later, when she had eaten, she complained of a megrim and went up to her room.

She worked harder than ever. Her poultry-yard was a success. Carefully dressed, she made her annual calls—those which the ladies of the village exchanged with great ceremoniousness. Finally she undertook to make a tour of the farms. She loved these errands in her cart over the forest roads that were rutted and ruined by the timber wagons. Cadette's grandson sat beside her, driving. The furze and the thickets of fern were yellowed and brittle. In the high oaks the dead leaves were quivering, holding fast against the warm breath from the south. The sharp round mirror of a lagoon reflected the long trunks of the pines and their tips, and the blue sky. Fresh gashes bled and burned in the innumerable trunks, perfuming the day. The call of the cuckoo

brought back other springs. The jolting cart threw Cadette's grandson against Noémi, and the two children laughed. The next day the young woman complained of aches, and the steward was asked to finish her tour of the farms. Save at mass, no one saw her thereafter until the morning when Jean Péloueyre came home.

Chapter xii

SHE went to meet him at the station, her organdie dress glowing in the sun. She was wearing cotton mittens, and from her bare neck hung a medal on which two cupids were wrestling with a goat. Children were playing at walking the rail. The little train whistled piercingly, long before it came into view. Noémi wanted her emotion to be joy. Absence having softened Jean Pélouеyre's features in her memory, she had, so to say, re-created him in order that he be not repugnant to her, and the vision she had of him was insidious, retouched. Her desire to love was so great that she believed herself impatient to embrace this unreal Jean Pélouеyre. Though desire had floated about her sweet and glowing body, caressing despite herself other faces, God knew that not once had she given way to so much as a troubling thought. In return, she did not doubt that she would be accorded the grace of seeing a husband step down from the train different from him she had been relieved to see depart.

Jean appeared on the step of a second-class carriage. No, no, he was no longer the same. His feeble hands could scarcely hold the valise which Cadette's son lifted lightly from his grasp. Taking Noémi's arm, he stumbled a little. "You are ill, poor Jean!" Nor did he, for his part, recognize her who had so greatly benefited by his absence. Blooming and blossoming, she was, even more than in the priest's parlour, a marvellous female accompanied by a stunted male. People about them stood whispering. Jean Péloueyre was ashamed to be seen by the news-vender, the station-master, the postman. "I should have brought the carriage. Why didn't you write me that you were ill?" Noémi opened the bed, washed Jean's face and hands, spread a white cloth over the bedside table and heaped upon it the journals and reviews which had been accumulating unopened. Like a wretched child who is being pampered, Jean watched her out of his quick little eyes. Monsieur Jérôme refused to let them send for Dr. Pieuchon: this mild man was beside himself at the thought of any other than himself ill in the house. His son had scarcely been put to bed before he took to bed himself, insisting that he was aching all over and refusing brutally Cadette's offers of help. Noémi came to see him, not to enquire how he felt

but to ask permission to send for the doctor. He cut her short: Pieuchon never left the microbe-infested room of his son. If she insisted upon a saw-bones let her call in "the tincture of iodine man." Noémi looked away and said she felt no confidence in that young man; and besides, was he not busy with all the consumptives in the region? Monsieur Jérôme interrupted her haughtily to declare that he had spoken and expected not to be further annoyed. As on his worst days, he turned his face to the wall and sent forth frightful sighs at regular intervals and those groans of "Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!" which used to waken Jean in the silence of night.

When Noémi came into her room again she found the servant setting out a folding cot. Of Jean, lying in the middle of the wide bed, there was to be seen only the glitter of his burning eyes, his flushed cheek-bones, and his pointed nose. He stammered something to the effect that he was cold in the wide bed, he had always preferred narrow beds, and in any case it was better that he and Noémi sleep apart until he had been examined by the doctor. She felt that she should embrace him, pretend disappointment, but no words came to her. She put her lips to his moist forehead, but he turned away, unable to endure the gratitude in that kiss. Thus

the day went by, calm and sad. Stretched out in his mute province he dozed until he was awakened by the tinkle of a spoon on a saucer. Although he was not gravely ill, Noémi held him up while he drank, and he sipped very slowly in order to feel as long as possible that cool arm about his neck. Twilight fell; the church bell rang. From the court they could hear Cadette's grandson: "Whoa! Hi!" He was harnessing. Monsieur Jérôme came shuffling through the door in a dressing gown spotted with drugs, barefoot in his slippers. He was ashamed of having lost his temper and had come to ask forgiveness and to feign uneasiness and pretend he could wait no longer to be told that Jean was not ill. It was he who had ordered Cadette's grandson to go for the young "tincture of iodine doctor." Jean protested that there was nothing wrong with him; he was worn out, that was all; a few days of rest and he would be well; the doctor would not understand why he had been sent for so urgently.

Noémi sat in the darkness and spoke no word. She listened while the sound of the wheels grew fainter, and then, without a shudder, without a sob, she wept. A shower sprayed the windows, hastening the coming of the night. Neither of them sent for the lamp. Later,

Cadette brought it in and set a small table beside Jean's bed. While they were eating Noémi asked if his historical work was finished. He shook his head and she asked no more questions. Again they heard the cart in the courtyard. "That is the doctor," said Jean. Noémi got up and stood well out of the circle of lamplight. She listened as if to an approaching storm to the rumble of a voice and the step on the stairs. Cadette opened the door and he walked in. He was stouter than Noémi had fancied and was what in the Péloueyre country is called a handsome rogue, black-haired, pomegranate-red skin, with the long eyes of an Andalusian mule which already sought shamelessly to meet Noémi's eyes and followed the line of her body with slow care. He had been thinking of her, he too had been thinking! She dared not leave the zone of darkness, but trembled where she stood. Meanwhile, he was examining Jean. "Will you unbutton your shirt, please? A handkerchief will do, madame. . . . Count thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three. . . ." The lamplight fell upon those collar-bones, those shoulder-blades, those ribs, that pitifully miserable body. No, Monsieur Péloueyre's condition was not alarming, but his temperature would bear watching. He prescribed tonics and cacodylic injections. From

time to time he looked at Noémi. Would he not think she had arranged to introduce him into the house? It was so extraordinary to send a cart four miles off for a doctor, only that he should put a stethoscope to a weakened man's chest. He lingered on, and in his thick accent defended himself against the charge that he had claimed to cure a case of tuberculosis as far advanced as that of young Pieuchon by the use of iodine. His drawling, rustic voice gave forth a deep, virile sound. Noémi felt herself scrutinized by glances which moved over her from beneath saffron coloured lids, but she stood before him a silent phantom.

He went as far as to say that it would be well to employ preventive measures; Monsieur Péloueyre was a fair field well prepared for bacilli. "A field, I should say, readily tuberculisable. The late Madame Péloueyre died of phthisis, did she not?" The medical jargon ill became that warm mouth created to dispense no other science than that of kisses. His judgment was that Monsieur Péloueyre needed the continued attention of a doctor; and in saying as much, he sought an invitation to return. Since Noémi remained mute he stood up and asked without beating about the bush if Monsieur Péloueyre wished him to come again, though it be only

to administer the injections. "What do you think, Noémi?" She said nothing, and Jean thought she had not heard. He repeated: "Noémi, what do you think? Should the doctor come back?" Finally she spoke: "There is no need at all," she said. Her tone was such that Jean was afraid she had annoyed the young man; he declared then that "the doctor was the sole judge." The handsome doctor remarked without embarrassment that he would come whenever he was sent for. Thereupon Noémi took up the lamp and preceded him out of the room. She hurried down the stairs, feeling upon the back of her neck his warm breath. The cart was standing before the door, and the young man got in without having been vouchsafed a glance. Cadette's grandson clucked. A lantern lit up the horse's croup. The night wind blew out the lamp which the young woman was holding high in the air, and she stood there in the darkness, on the threshold of that dead house, listening to the gradually fainter rolling of the cart.

She could not sleep. On his iron cot Jean tossed and mumbled confused words. Noémi got up to calm him. She tucked him in without waking him, as she would have done to the child she was never to bear.

Chapter xiii

TWO days later Jean Péloueyre resumed his old habits. He stole out of the house during his father's siesta, went looking for magpies, stopped on his way back at the church, and came home as late as possible. Noémi was already losing her bloom. Jean stared at the rings which formed under those sad eyes that were never raised to his without a humble sweetness. He had hoped that his exile from the conjugal bed would suffice to acclimatize her beside him. But his wife was struggling despairingly against her repugnance, and this struggle was killing her. Several times she had called Jean to come into her bed, and when he pretended to be asleep she had got up and kissed him—kissed him with the lips of those saints who of old kissed lepers. But Jean Péloueyre had torn himself from her embraces; it had been he who had cried out in horror, "Let me be."

The high walls of the garden were grown with dark lilacs. In the afterglow the odour of syringas filled the

air. Cockchafers whirred in the dying light. In the month of Mary, after the litanies had been chanted, the parish priest said: "Your prayers are asked for the success of a number of young men who are taking their examinations, for the marriage of several girls, the conversion of a father of a family, and the health of a young man in danger of death." Everybody knew he was referring to Dr. Pieuchon's son who was extremely ill. In June the lilacs bloomed. Noémi expressed her surprise that Jean no longer took his gun when he went out. He explained that the magpies all knew him now, and the shrewd birds would not allow him to come near them. She was afraid that he might be overdoing it: there was a time when he came home with a bright gleam in his eyes; now his face was drawn and white. He would say it was the heat that made him pale. One night Noémi heard him cough again and again. She called to him in a low voice: "Are you asleep, Jean?" He told her that his throat was a little sore, it was nothing; but she knew he was making an effort to stifle the cough which broke forth nevertheless. She lit a candle and saw that he was bathed in sweat. She looked at him in anguish. His eyes were shut and he seemed absorbed by a mysterious work going on within him.

He smiled at his wife, and Noémi was overwhelmed by the tenderness and the tranquillity of his smile. And he said in a weak voice, "I am thirsty."

He had no fever the next morning; indeed, his temperature was too low. Noémi was reassured. She asked him not to go out after luncheon, but she could not hold him back. Her insistence seemed to displease him, and he looked at his watch as if fearing to be late. Monsieur Jérôme joked about it: "She will think you are off to an assignation." He said nothing, and his hurried step sounded in the entry. A storm was tarnishing the sky, and it was as if the silence of the birds had suddenly stilled the leaves.

All that day, sitting at her ground floor window, Noémi was afraid. At four o'clock the church bell rang lightly at recurrent intervals and the young woman crossed herself because somebody was dying. She heard a voice say on the square: "That is for young Pieuchon. He almost went this morning already." Large drops of rain hollowed the dust and raised up its odour of stormy evenings. Her father-in-law being still asleep, Noémi went into the kitchen to talk to Cadette about Robert Pieuchon. The old woman was deaf and had not heard the death knell. She said that "Moussu Jean" would

bring them the news; and when Noémi expressed surprise at this, Cadette sighed and whined that she had guessed "the mistress" did not know, else she would surely have forbidden the poor gentleman—*"lou praou moussu"*—weak as he was, to spend all his afternoons with the Pieuchon boy. And for a month now! But he had forbidden his old Cadette to say anything about it to anybody. Noémi pretended that this was not news to her. She went out. It was not raining: a dusty wind was hustling the swollen clouds.

She went towards the doctor's house where death had already closed the shutters. Jean Péloueyre stood in the doorway, blinking with dazzled eyes, although the day was dim. He did not see his wife. His face was ashen and his thoughts were not of this world as he went instinctively towards the church. Noémi followed him at a distance. She was seized by the damp coolness of the nave, that chill as of earth, that chill as of the freshly opened grave which seizes upon living bodies in those churches which have sunk bit by bit so that one goes down a few steps in order to enter them. Noémi heard again that cough whose sound had wakened her the night before, but she heard it this time reverberating in the infinity of the arches.

Chapter xiv

JEAN had asked that his cot be moved down into a room on the ground floor which opened on the garden. When the air there stifled him the cot was carried out under the verandah, and there he would lie and watch the wind contract or dilate the blue between the leaves. An icepail had been procured, for with the exception of cold milk Jean scarcely swallowed anything but a little flavoured ice. His father would come to look and smile at him, but from a distance. Jean might have preferred to hide his dying hours in the tenebrous bedroom, but he had chosen to die in the garden so that Noémi should be less exposed to the contagion. Injections of morphine benumbed him. Rest: rest after those horrible afternoons at the bedside of young Pieuchon crying out in despair over all that he was leaving forever: nights of revelry in Bordeaux; dances to the sound of mechanical organs in the suburban roadhouses; bicycle trips with the dust glued to his skinny hairy legs and his heart bursting with fatigue; and most of all the caresses of the girls.

The Cazenaves had spread abroad the story that Monsieur Jérôme's avarice was withholding from his son the benefits of a salubrious climate and the cures that are effected in high altitudes. In truth, apart from the fact that Jean was not the man to die away from home, Dr. Pieuchon asserted that nothing was so helpful against tuberculosis as the forests of the southwest. He even lined Jean's room with young pines and surrounded his bed with pots overflowing with resin. When he had exhausted all his science he called into consultation his young colleague, even though it was agreed that Jean would not be able to endure iodine "in massive doses." Noémi received the handsome fellow with an indifference which was not so great as to prevent her seeing that he grew pale when she looked at him or when their hands touched. With each meeting she had the satisfaction of knowing more surely that nothing was dearer to her than this dying man—her husband. But it is possible that in the darkest corner of her heart she felt the young male firmly harpooned and was as tranquil as she appeared only because she was certain of drawing him up one day on the bank, alive and palpitating. Jean forbade Noémi to kiss him, but he permitted the pressure of her cool hand on his brow. Did he believe now that she

loved him? He did believe it, and he said, "Be Thou forever blessed, O, Lord, Who hast given me before I died a woman's love." And as formerly on his solitary wanderings he would ruminate endlessly the same line of poetry, so now, when he was weary of his rosary and while Noémi held his wrist and took his pulse he would repeat in a whisper Pauline's cry in *Polyeucte: Mon Polyeucte touche à son heure dernière*, and he would smile. Not that he thought himself a martyr. People had always said of him, "He is a poor creature," and he had always believed himself one. A glance backward over the grey water of his life led him into contempt for himself. What stagnation! But beneath those sleeping waters a secret current of life had trembled, and now he who had lived like a man dead was dying in a kind of rebirth.

One evening, as the priest and Dr. Pieuchon were lingering in the entry, Noémi came to them and demanded bitterly why they had never told her of Jean's daily stations at the bedside of the consumptive Pieuchon boy. The doctor lowered his head and said he had not been aware of the state of Jean's health. In his own boundless charity he had not been astonished by a devotion like that he practised himself and of which his

son had been the beneficiary. The priest defended himself more vigorously: Jean had insisted upon his silence, and a spiritual guide, as concerned those he guided, was forced to push discretion to the point of scruple. "But it was you, Father, it was you who sent him on that fatal journey to Paris." "Was it I only, Noémi?" She leaned against the wall and widened with her finger a scratch in the marble-painted plaster. They could hear Jean cough. Cadette was shuffling in her slippers. The priest went on: "I acted after I had prayed, Noémi. We must adore the ways of God." He slipped on his wadded coat. But contradictory feelings were struggling secretly within him, and he wept for Jean Péloueyre through his sleepless nights. In vain did he repeat to himself that Jean had bequeathed his heritage to Noémi and that Monsieur Jérôme intended, when the poor child was dead, to give his young wife the house and the greater part of his wealth—on condition that she never re-marry. The priest, who was a scrupulous man but over-ready to take charge of the destiny of others, looked into his heart. He had not doubted for an instant that this marriage was to be a happy one; and, *sub specie æterni*, was not its success admirable? What had he to gain in this affair? He was a shepherd concerned for the weal

of his flock. Each time that he judged himself, the priest absolved himself; but he re-opened his trial again and again. He was fearful of having lost his ability to distinguish between the just and the unjust, and he was bewildered by his sudden hesitancy over the validity of his actions. He was humbled, and became less pontifical; when he celebrated the daily mass he no longer undid the train of his cassock, and he stopped wearing the three-cornered hat which had hitherto singled him out among the celebrants. All his traits of pettiness dropped away from him one by one. He was not delighted when news reached him that, although not a dean, the bishop had bestowed upon him the right to wear the capuchin over his surplice. Was it possible that he, a guardian of souls, had been concerned with such miserable frivolities? Nothing was important now to him except to determine clearly what part he had played in this drama: had he been the docile instrument of God? or had this poor country priest usurped the rôle of the infinite Being?

Meanwhile, every evening a cart drove off over the icy road, bearing the young doctor. Through the tips of the close-grown pines the moonlight filtered, caught in the entwined branches. Round dark clouds floated in the

sky in motionless flight. Now and then, only a few hundred yards ahead of the horse, the stubby shadows of wild boars would cross the road from ditch to ditch. The pines opened and showed a cloud lying on the earth behind which lay hidden a field. The road dropped and the cart drove into the icy breath of a stream.

Wrapped in his fur coat, isolated in the odour of the mist and of his pipe, the young doctor knew nothing of the stars that glittered above the pines. His nose, like the muzzle of a dog, never rose from the terrestrial crust. And when he was not thinking of the kitchen in which he was soon to dry off, and the soup into which he would pour his wine, his mind was upon Noémi, so close to his hand and yet untouched. "Still," this hunter told himself, "I did not miss her; she is wounded."

His instinct told him when woman, like game, being crowded close asked for mercy. He had heard the cry of this young body. How many women had been his, forbidden fruit, women married to men and not to a wreck like that Péloueyre! Was this Noémi, more gravely wounded and more defenceless than the rest, to remain unattainable?

As long as her dying husband lingered on, modesty

would command her; but what, before her husband fell ill, what had held back this half-fascinated partridge? What stronger magnet clung to her in the shadow, withdrew her out of the lamplight? Another love? He did not believe her devout; he had had some experience of devout women, had more than once matched himself against a parish priest for the possession of a lamb. The devout girl plays a game, allows herself a venial sin, plays with fire, burns a foot, and at the last second slips between your fingers, drawn as by an invisible cord back into the confessional. He made plans for the time when Jean Péloueyre should have turned up his toes. "I'll get her" he said to himself. And he laughed, possessing the patience of the peasant trailing his game.

It was towards this time that the pious people of the village, going into the church at mid-day and thinking themselves alone, would tremble at the sound of a great sigh in the chancel. The priest spent almost all his free hours in the shadow, before his Judge. Only there did peace descend upon him, not that peace which drips in the silence of tenebrous, almost submerged country churches, but the peace which nothing earthly can bring. It was a far cry, the priest thought, from the wizened little Jean Péloueyre who was hardly able, on

the eve of feast days, to polish the crystal of the candelabras and pick the long moss of which the parish ladies wove wreaths—a far cry from the killer of magpies to this dying man who was giving up his life for the salvation of others. The priest grovelled before Him whose secret it is to put upon slaves the likeness of God.

Chapter xv

SUMMER had grown kinder to suffocating Jean Péloueyre. The frequent showers of September had ruddied the leaves. Cadette's grandson brought him the first mushroom-like *cèpes*, with their odour of sylvan earth, and showed him for his amusement the ortolans caught at daybreak. He would fatten them, he said, in darkness and serve them to "Moussu" Jean after steeping them in old armagnac brandy. Flights of wood-pigeons presaged an early winter: soon they would be setting out the decoys to draw the ring-doves. Jean had always loved the approach of the dying year, that secret harmony between his heart and the harvested fields of millet, the wild moors whose only inhabitants were the ring-doves, the flocks, and the wind. When, at dawn, they opened the window so that he might breathe more easily, he drew into his lungs and recognized the perfume of his unhappy returns from the chase in the October twilight. But it was not given him to live in peace through the passage of these days.

Noémi did not know that we owe silence to the dying, and as before she had not been able to hide from him her repugnance, so now she was unable to spare him her remorse. Hungry for his forgiveness, she would wet his hand with her tears. In vain did he reassure her: "It was I who chose you, Noémi; mine is the blame because I had no thought of you." She shook her head, saw only that Jean was dying for her sake; that he was great and noble; that she would love him if he were to get well. She gave him now a hundred-fold the tenderness of which she had been so chary. How was Noémi to know that from a Jean Péloueyre in convalescence she would instantly have begun to shrink, and that he had to have reached his last hour of life before she was able to love him? She was a very young woman, ignorant and carnal, and unacquainted with her heart. But this desiring heart was without guile, and submissive to God. Awkwardly she sought to draw from the dying man the word which would deliver her from her remorse. He lost heart after these debates and wished that he had not to be left alone with her; and he might have been alone with her often—for Monsieur Jérôme was bound to his bed by all his exorcised ills—except that the young doctor was proving himself so devoted. Jean

Péloueyre was astounded at such incomprehensible fidelity on the part of a stranger. He was too weak to carry on a conversation, but at least he enjoyed the young man's presence.

One afternoon towards the close of September he awoke out of a long doze and saw Noémi in an armchair by the window, her head laid back in slumber. He listened to the breath of the tranquil child, and closed his eyes. Hearing the door swing, he opened them again: the doctor was stepping softly in. Jean was too weary for even a single word of greeting, and feigned sleep. The floor creaked under the young man's hunting boots. Then silence, a silence which incited Jean Péloueyre to look. The stranger-friend was standing beside the slumbering young woman. At first he stood straight above her; then imperceptibly he bent lower and his hairy hand trembled. Jean Péloueyre shut his eyes and heard Noémi's low voice: "Oh! excuse me. You surprised me, doctor. I must have dozed off. Our patient is a little low to-day. The air is so stifling. Look: not even the leaves are stirring." The doctor remarked that there was a breeze from the southwest, and Noémi answered: "The wind from Spain will bring a storm." The storm was this pallid young man, wild with desire, his eyes as

charged as the electrical sky. Noémi got up and went over to Jean, putting the iron cot between herself and the man whose glance ran hotly over her. He stammered, "You must look after yourself, Madame, for his sake." "Oh, I am very strong. I eat and sleep like a beast in the field. What do people do who die of unhappiness?" They sat down at some distance from one another. Jean Péloueyre seemed still to be asleep. He was humming to himself with motionless lips and stressing the scansion: *Mon Péloueyre touche à son heure dernière*—the last hour of my Péloueyre has come.

He was less often stifled, ate more, as if the dying season had held him embraced in its veils and its odour of tears: still, these were the days of his greatest suffering. On the brink of death, but still alive, he felt no doubts about Noémi—yet, once he was swallowed up by the darkness, what would defend him against this young man who was so handsome? The miserable shadow of a dead man cannot come between those who were predestined to love one another. He did not let them see the agony he was enduring: he would shake hands with the doctor, smile at him. Oh, how much he would have preferred to live, to vanquish him, to be her chosen one! What dark madness had inspired in him this de-

sire for death! Even without Noémi, even without a wife, the air was so good to breathe, the caress of the wind in the dawn was so much sweeter than any other caress!

Soaked in perspiration, loathing the odour of illness that clung to him, he looked out at Cadette's grandson who was handing him the first woodcock of the season through the window. Oh, hunting days! The beatitude of the pines with their tips brown and grey in the blue sky, like lowly folk raised up in glory! He knew that in the thick depth of the wood there was a green stream of herbage, where the alders and the fog bespoke fresh ochre-coloured water. Jean Péloueyre's pines form the front rank of the immense army that bleeds between the ocean and the Pyrenees; they dominate Sauternes and that burning valley where the sun is really present in every seed of every grape. Given more time, Jean might have been less perturbed by his heart, because ugliness like beauty is lost in old age, and he should at least have had this, the returns from the hunt, the gathered mushrooms. The summers of past years were burning in bottles of Yquem, and the sunsets of ended years were reddening the Gruau-Larose. Out of doors were the wide and rainy moors, indoors the great kitchen

fires beside which one sat and read. . . . Meanwhile Noémi was saying to the doctor, "There will be no need for you to come to-morrow." "Oh yes, yes: I shall come again." Did Noémi understand? Was it possible that she should not understand? Had he ever declared himself to her? Was Jean to die without seeing the outcome of this struggle that went on at his bedside? It was as if some one had known that Jean was slipping the noose of life without excessive suffering and was weaving hastily a net through which he could not burst without an immense effort. Yet one by one the meshes were broken to the moment of his final relapse: his passion died before he died, and the day came when he could smile at them all with the same smile, the same unequivocal gratitude. He no longer murmured verses to himself, but words like these: "It is I. Be not afraid. . . ."

The rains of the end of winter closed about the tenebrous chamber. Why did they wonder if Jean Péloueyre was suffering, since his suffering was a joy? Of life he knew now only the chant of the cocks, the joltings of the farm-cart, the calls of the bells, that unending patter on the roof, and at night the sobbing of the birds of prey and the cries of murdered animals. His last dawn

touched the window-panes. Cadette lit a fire whose resinous smoke filled the room. Over his expiring flesh was wafted this breath of burning pines which through so many torrid summers had been blown by his native moor into his face. The d'Artiailhs maintained that he could hear still, but could no longer see. Monsieur Jérôme, in his drug-spotted dressing gown, stood in the doorway with a handkerchief to his mouth. He was crying. Cadette and her grandson were kneeling in the shadow. The voice of the priest seemed by his propitiatory words to force invisible folding-doors: "Depart, O Christian soul, of this sinful world, in the name of God the Father Almighty who created thee; in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God who suffered and died for thee; in the name of the Holy Ghost, who sanctified thee; in the name of the Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Dominations, Virtues, Cherubim and Seraphim. . . . Noémi gazed at him burningly and said to herself, "He was beautiful." The people of the village thought the death knell rung for his dying was the morning angelus.

Chapter xvi

MONSIEUR JÉRÔME took to his bed. The mirrors in which Jean Péloueyre had stared at his wretched face were veiled with linen. His corpse was dressed as if he were going to hear high mass: Cadette even put a felt hat upon his head and a prayer book into his hands. The kitchen was filled with a sound of celebration, for there were to be forty people in the dining-room. Farmers' wives howled about the hearse like the wailers of antiquity. Never before had the parish priest celebrated a funeral service of such distinction. A pair of gloves and a *sou* wrapped in paper were given to each guest. It rained during the service, but the procession to the cemetery moved forward in sunlight. In the earth, in the dry, mummifying and embalming sand, Jean Péloueyre awaited the day of resurrection.

Noémi Péloueyre shrouded herself in crêpe for three years. Her deep mourning rendered her literally invisible. She left the house only to go to mass, and even then she made certain in advance that there was no

one on the square. The first heat of summer came, and despite the heat a white-bordered collar was wrapped round her throat. Certain criticisms obliged her to refuse a dress whose black was too silky, too brilliant.

It was towards this time that the young doctor's conversion was bruited about: he had been seen at mass on a week day, between calls on the sick. When the parish priest was asked about an event so consoling to a pastor, he smiled with his sewn, lipless mouth, but said nothing. He must have lost his authority and persuasive force, for he could not make Monsieur Jérôme agree to strike out of his will the clause obliging Noémi never to re-marry. He failed again when he tried to soften the rigours of an intensity of mourning which he declared excessive. Monsieur Jérôme was proud to belong to a family in which widows had never put off black, and the d'Artiailhs displayed great zeal in maintaining Noémi in her shroud. This was why, in those winter dawns when the church is so dark, the young doctor could no more see the widow in her tenebrous cloud than she could see the husband who lay beneath the sealed stones touched daily by her knees. Now and again he had a glimpse of a face bright with youth, despite the fasting of communion mornings and a cloistered life.

On the day after the anniversary mass, when the whole village learned that Noémi Péloueyre would not throw off her veil, the doctor's Christian sentiments wavered. He neglected not only the church but his patients. Old Pieuchon had been told that his young colleague was drinking, and even that he got up in the middle of the night to drink. Monsieur Jérôme had never been in better health, and his daughter-in-law enjoyed a little leisure. She looked after the estate, but pines need scarcely any attention. Her sound, scrupulous piety was brief and not nourished by reading. She had no gift for reflection, and thought chiefly in formulas. As there is no poverty, so to say, in the land of resin, and as it wants no time at all to collect the bleating *Enfants de Marie* around a harmonium once a week, what was there left to Noémi except, as is the custom among the ladies of the moors, to divert herself without excess at table? By the time of the third year of her mourning Noémi was growing fat and Dr. Pieuchon was prescribing an hour's stroll every day.

One afternoon in the early dog days she walked as far as the farm called Tartehume, where she let herself drop exhausted upon a bank of grass. Around her the gorse was filled with the droning of bees and with gad-

flys which swarmed out of the heather to sting her ankles. Noémi was conscious of the rapid beating of her heart, the heart-beat of a stout young woman, and was thinking only of the dusty road which a recent cutting of the pines had delivered up unprotected to the sun. Back over this road for nearly three miles she would have to walk. She felt that these innumerable pines, with their red and sticky gashes, these sands and burnt off moors, would forever keep her captive. In this ignorant and unintelligent woman, there awoke vaguely the debate which had torn Jean Péloueyre: was it not this ashen earth, this hermit's existence, which forced an unhappy woman dying of thirst to raise her head and lean yearningly towards the eternal cooling spring? She wiped her moist hands on her black-bordered handkerchief and stared at her dusty shoes and at the ditch where the young heather was opening like fingers. When she raised her head there was blown into her face the odour of rye bread which was the breath of the farms. Suddenly she sprang to her feet and stood trembling. She recognized the tilbury which had stopped before the farmhouse. How many times, between the closed shutters of a window, had she watched those gleaming axle-trees with more love than ever she brought to the stars! She shook

out her sand-filled skirt. The jolting of wagons came to her ear. She heard a jay cry. Noémi stood motionless in a cloud of flies, her eyes upon the door through which the young man was about to appear. Open-mouthed and with swelling breast, she waited, waited, a humble and submissive beast. When the farmhouse door swung open her eyes tried to pierce the darkness within, where a body stirred. A familiar voice was prescribing, in the dialect of the region, enormous doses of iodine. He came out. The sun gleamed upon every button of his hunting coat. The farmer was holding his horse by the bridle. He was saying that this was the most dangerous season of forest fires; everything was still dry, nothing in the wood was green, and the marshes were waterless. The young man took up the reins. Why did Noémi shrink back? A power drew her back, arrested her impulse towards him who now moved forward. She plunged into the brambles taller than herself; the twigs scratched her hands. One instant she stopped, and she listened to a cart rolling over a road that she could no longer see.

Doubtless she mused as she fled that the village would not without protest allow her to fall from her rank of admirable widow, and that a clause in Monsieur Jérôme's will would forever make it impossible to win the d'Artia-

ilhs' consent to what Madame d'Artiailh called "a fool of a marriage." But would not Noémi have swept aside such obstacles if she had not been held back by another law higher than her instinct? She who was low was condemned to greatness; she, a slave, was condemned to reign. This stout village matron could not but be greater than she was meant to be; every road was closed to her except the way of renunciation. From that moment, in the fly-filled, stunted pines, she knew that her fidelity to the dead was to be her humble glory, and that she could not again attempt to evade it. Thus Noémi ran through the heather until in her exhaustion she embraced an oak, stunted under its fustian of leaves, dead but still vibrant with a breath of fire—a black oak that looked very like Jean Péloueyre.

II

Genitrix

Chapter i

"SHE is asleep."

"She is pretending. Come."

Mathilde Cazenave's husband and mother-in-law stood whispering at her bedside while she peered through her eyelashes at their huge and confused shadows on the wall. They tiptoed on creaking shoes to the door. Mathilde heard their footsteps on the echoing stair; then their voices, the one sharp and the other hoarse, filled the long corridor on the lower floor. Now they were hurrying through the icy desert of the vestibule that separated the wing in which Mathilde was housed from that where mother and son slept in adjoining rooms. In the distance there was the sound of a closing door. The young woman sighed with relief and opened her eyes. Straight overhead was a wooden bar from which hung a white calico curtain that ran round the mahogany bed. The night-lamp lit up a few blue clusters on the wall and, on the table beside her, a green, gold-bordered glass of water that quivered at the pas-

sage of a locomotive, for the house stood close to a railway station. The shunting ended, Mathilde lay listening to the murmurous night of the declining spring, listening as, when a train has stopped unexpectedly in the open country, a traveller listens to the chirping of crickets in an unfamiliar field. The ten o'clock express rolled by and the old house trembled to its foundations: the floors vibrated; a door seemed to have swung open in the garret or in an unused room. Then the train rumbled across the iron bridge over the Garonne. Mathilde listened hard and eagerly to that rumbling which soon was covered by a rustling of branches.

She dozed off, then woke again. Once more her bed shook: not the rest of the house, but only her bed. And yet no convoy was rolling past the sleeping station. Several seconds elapsed before Mathilde became aware that a shudder was shaking her body and the bed. Her teeth were chattering, although she was already hot. She tried, but could not reach the thermometer on the bedside table. Then she stopped trembling, while an inner blaze rose up like lava: she was burning up. The night wind bellied the curtains and filled the room with an odour of syringa and coal smoke. Mathilde

thought of the night before last when, drenched in the blood of her miscarriage, she had been fearful of the touch of the midwife's agile and uncertain fingers.

"I must have a terrible fever. . . . They wouldn't get someone to sit up with me."

Her dilated eyes stared at the swinging aureole on the ceiling. Her two hands clasped her young breasts, and she called in a loud voice: "Marie! Marie of Lados! Marie!"

But how was she to be heard by the servant, Marie (called "of Lados" because she was born in the village of Lados), who slept under the roof? What was that black mass by the window, that sated beast lying there, or perhaps crouching to spring, rather than sated? Mathilde saw the low platform which long ago her mother-in-law had had built before every window in the house so that she might the more readily follow the comings and goings of her son, whether he was "makings the rounds" to the north, striding in the path to the south, or expected home through the eastern door where she would await his return. It was on one of these platforms, the one in the back parlour, that, during their betrothal, Mathilde had seen the enormous woman rise

up in fury and stamp her foot while shouting, "You shall never have my son! You will never take him from me!"

Meanwhile the lava in her body was growing chill. An infinite fatigue, a collapse of all her being, forbade her to stir a finger—even to detach her night-dress from her sweating flesh. She heard the creak of the outer door. This was the hour when Madame Cazenave and her son, lantern in hand, walked through the garden to the secret places built near the peasant's house. Only they had keys to these places. Mathilde summoned up the nightly scene: one waiting for the other, and their conversation going on through the door into which a heart had been cut. Again she felt a chill. Her teeth chattered. The bed shook. She sought with one hand the ancient and frayed bell-pull. She could hear the rope rub against the cornice; but no bell sounded in the tenebrous house. Mathilde began to burn again. The dog growled from beneath the stoop where he lay; then he barked furiously because some one was walking on the narrow road between the garden and the station. She said to herself, "Only yesterday I should still have been so afraid." In this vast, ceaselessly shaking house whose windows were not even protected by full shut-

ters, she had spent nights of mad terror. How many times she had sat up suddenly in bed and cried out, "Who is that?" But fear had gone, as if no one could reach her now through that ring of fever. The dog was still whining, although there was no longer the sound of footsteps. Mathilde heard Marie's voice: "What is it, Péliou?" and she heard Péliou beat his tail happily against the stone steps while Marie calmed him in her dialect: *"Là, là, tuchaou!"* Once more the flame went out of her consumed flesh. Her immense fatigue became peace. She felt as if she were stretching her broken limbs upon the sand beside the sea. She did not think to pray.

Chapter ii

FAR from that room, on the other side of the vestibule and in the back parlour next the kitchen, mother and son sat on that June night and watched the birth and death of flame in a log. Lying in her lap was a half-knitted stocking, while with a long needle she scratched her head in which spots of white skull peered between the dyed locks. He had just stopped cutting up with his mother's scissors a cheap edition of the maxims of Epictetus. This former student of engineering had decided that the books which contained the essence of the wisdom taught through the ages would reveal to him mathemetically the secret of life and death. Therefore he was industriously collating apophthegms from all possible sources, and in the childish pleasure of using the scissors he already found succour. But on this evening neither mother nor son could wander from the thoughts which inhabited them both. Fernand Cazenave sprang suddenly to his long legs and said, "I think I heard somebody call out." He shuffled in his slippers towards the door, but his mother caught him.

"You are not going through that vestibule again. You have coughed three times already this evening."

"She is all alone."

What harm did he think could come to her? To fret so over an "accident"! He took the old woman's arm and asked her to listen. Nothing but a locomotive and a nightingale in the darkness; nothing but the slight and uninterrupted creaking of the house because of the shunting about the railway station. Now it would not tremble again until the first train came through at dawn. Yet it happened occasionally that despite the time-tables long goods trains would shake the earth, and each of the Cazenaves, startled out of sleep, would light a candle to see what time it was. They sat down again, and Félicité, to divert her son's thoughts, said, "There was something you read to-night that you wanted to cut out. Do you remember?"

He remembered. It was in Spinoza. Something like: "Wisdom is a meditation upon life, not upon death."

"Good, isn't it?"

He had a weak heart, and his terror of death inspired his choice of maxims. Also, he went instinctively towards those most easily understood by his intelligence, which was more apt for figures than for ideas. He

moved about in this room whose green wall-paper was covered with relief maps. A couch and armchairs upholstered in black leather gave it the atmosphere of a waiting-room. Long narrow strips of wine-coloured cloth framed the windows. The lamp on the desk shone upon an open account book, a trayful of penholders, a magnet, and a bit of blackened wax. Monsieur Thiers' face smiled up through the crystal of a paper weight. As Fernand came towards his mother from the far end of the room he saw the grey and swollen face twist in a stifled laugh. His eyes asked a question, and she said, "It would not even have been a boy." He protested that Mathilde could not be held responsible for that. But the old woman bobbed her head up and down, and without raising her eyes from her knitting boasted that from the first sight of her she had "seen through this little schoolmistress." Fernand, who had sat down beside the low table on which gleamed the scissors among the fragmentary volumes of maxims, ventured to ask, "what woman would have found favour in your eyes." His mother's joyous fury burst forth: "Not that one, you may be sure!"

She had taken the girl's measure on the second day, when the goose had dared interrupt with a "you've

told that story already," the tale of Fernand's success at school, which he loved to hear; the story of his single failure to solve a problem, the trick in which he had not seen, and that handsome gesture of his when, to show his strength of soul, he had put on evening clothes and gone to hear *les Huguenots* at the opera: "And so much more than I could tell!"

Ah, the little idiot had not been slow to go on the rocks! In less than two months Fernand was back again in his school-boy bed in the room next his mother's, and the intruder was living almost entirely by herself in the other wing of the house. Thereafter she counted for a little less than Marie of Lados until that day when she was able to imitate those women under the Reign of Terror who, at the last minute, escaped the guillotine by declaring themselves pregnant. In the beginning the wench was only too successful. She had become sacred to Fernand. He was bursting with pride at the thought that there would perhaps be one more Cazenave in the world. As much as any great noble, Fernand venerated his name, a circumstance which exasperated Félicité, who was a Péloueyre, born of "the best there is on the moors," and who disliked to recall that when she came into the Cazenave family in 1850

her husband's grandmother "still wore the kerchief" on her head. During those five months of pregnancy it was no good struggling—although in her way the old woman had been active, for the enemy might have given birth to a son. Thank heaven the midwife had said from the first that Mathilde was badly built and doomed to "accidents."

"I know you, my darling boy. You would not have been interested in a little daughter. The sight of her would have made you sad. You would have had just as much trouble and expense with her as with a son. In the first place, a nurse: Mathilde would not have been able to nurse the baby. She is not good at that. I was on my feet a week after you were born and I didn't wean you until you were eight months old. And I did it all over again with your poor brother Henri."

He got up, kissed his mother on the brow, and said in a solemn voice, "You are the highest type of the mother of a race."

He sat down, and again his scissors squeaked.

"Tell me, Fernand, what would you have done with a little girl?"

The old woman went on, affirming her victory:

"Can you imagine a little girl whom she would have brought up to hate us?"

He stared into space with his round, protuberant eyes, as if seeking the childish phantom, the frail scarecrow, invented by his mother. But, having no imagination, he saw nothing.

He could not see the little child whom at that moment his wife was summoning to her mind's eye in order to console herself for the misery of dying alone. That blood-soaked parcel borne away by the midwife would have become the living being whose teeth Mathilde seemed to feel at her breast. The enfevered woman discovered in her heart a childish face like no other she had ever known—a face without great beauty, a little puny, even, with, in the corner of the mouth, that birthmark Mathilde bore herself. "I should have sat in the dark beside her bed until the express had gone by, for it would have frightened her so." The kingdom into which she would have locked herself with the child would not have been of this world. Those who hated her would not have been able to follow her into it. And here she lay, the blood flowing into her aching head, unable to rid

herself of an obsessive, insoluble, and torturing question: Does God know what young tree would have sprung from this dead seed? Does He know what those eyes would have been like that never saw the light? When one has died, does not one meet again those millions of beings who have lived before? What would that parcel of flesh have become, that was detained as a potentiality? . . . But here Mathilde's thought wavered. The flood of fire was receding; the fever was pretending to abandon her shivering body inundated in sticky sweat, a prey to that annihilation which is a foreboding of death. She felt herself dismissed by a wild beast which at any moment might be back for her. Spread out on her bed, lying on her back, she awaited the approaching shudder, she spied upon its coming. It did not come. She scrutinized the depths of her being as if she were staring into a sky without daring to believe that the storm was passing. Perhaps she would live. Live! Hot and slow, the heavy tears rolled down her cheeks. She joined, she clasped, her sweating hands: "Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary that never was it known that any one who fled to thy protection implored thy help and sought thy intercession, was left unaided." Mathilde was flung up again upon the strand of life. She heard again the

nocturnal music of the world. The night breathed in the leaves. The great trees whispered in the moonlight and woke no bird. A wave of pure cool wind came in from the ocean and ran along the multitudinous tips of the pines, ran over the low-grown vines, drew up into itself a final perfume from the aromatic lime-tree in the garden, and died at last upon that small drawn face.

Chapter iii

HER weariness was immense but sweet. Although her heart was beating a little madly, she was not in pain. No, no, she would not die; and while she lived she would not any longer allow her adversary to overwhelm her. If only another pregnancy were possible! Then the enemy would be forced to surrender. The whole thing lay in taming her mother-in-law. With Fernand it was merely a matter of getting the bridle over his head. She had been a fool to imagine that, once married, she need only sit back and give voice unconstrainedly to whatever came into her head. Thus she had loosed immediately her mocking humour, which had been leashed with difficulty during the days of their betrothal. She had thought herself victorious even before the race began.

On the farther side of the hedge which separated the Cazenave place from the garden of the Lachassaignes, where she was employed as governess, Mathilde had been contemptuous of her power to inflame the desire

of a timid man of fifty years, the more so as this great fish had swum avidly into her net. Peering between the branches at mother and son while they heckled one another, she should have realized that the man had picked her up as he would a weapon, that she was no more to him than an instrument of warfare in the daily combat in which hitherto the son had been unfailingly defeated by the mother. To-night, lying on the bottom of an abyss of fatigue, she hoped henceforth to be able to stifle her ridiculing laughter, to blunt those darts which had infuriated Fernand Cazenave, an idol habituated to worship. She forgot that the whole of her unfortunate existence had fashioned this spirit in her, that she had hardened herself, armed herself deliberately with harshness, erected a wall of mockery between the world and herself.

As a little girl she had lived in a low house on the boulevard de Caudéran in Bordeaux. Young as she was, she had already begun, with her younger brother, Jean, to make fun secretly of their father, a third form master in the *lycée,* when he interrupted the correction of his student's papers in order to stare vacantly into space, while the lamplight fell upon the skinny hands that lay

on the childishly written pages and the glow in the shade sent a strange greenish cast over his petrified face. Even at that time Mathilde and Jean knew that their mother had not died in Bordeaux as they had been told, that she had died under some other sky, in the company of some other husband. Even so, they laughed without malice, for they could not hear the moaning of this man, of this game fleeing before the hounds.

It had been the dangerous glory of this scholar, whose beard was as carefully combed and trimmed as his style, to give a course of ten lectures one year on "The Sadness of René"—that most romantic of romantics—before the young ladies of a private school, where he met and won a *demoiselle* Coustous, the niece of a shipowner and the daughter of a man whose own racing stable had been his ruin. He was incapable of defending her against the offensive of a young man of her circle, and such had been his innocence in the event, that those very members of the Coustous family who had refused to attend their wedding made a point of greeting him after he had been betrayed. Later, when a series of little cerebral lapses had brought him to the point of incapacity to correct his papers, Mathilde, by now a student, took over the work. It was she, too, who helped

him mornings into the Croix-Blanche tram and accompanied him to school, but only as far as the street behind the *lycée,* lest the day-pupils recognize them. Standing motionless on the pavement, she would look after her father as he walked weak-kneed to his class where doubtless an undisciplined horde awaited him. Frightful as that time was, she still could laugh when cousin Lachassaigne, their "Providence," expressed his bewilderment that the schoolmaster did not resign and retire, or when Madame Lachassaigne (born a Coustous) repeated that in their place she was sure she would have economized to the extent of giving up both sitting-room and servant. Mathilde had also thought it comical that her father and her cousin preferred Jean to her, admiring his angelical face, his curly burnished-gold hair, his white teeth and bright laugh. Jean would let himself out evenings through the sitting-room window, and Mathilde would sit up late to draw the bolt of the great outer door when he came in long past midnight, his innocent obscene eyes magnified by the circles of blessed fatigue, his hands dirty, his shirt still open, and on his shoulder the bitten memory of some girl's last kiss. She would greet this dawn-ruffled angel without reproach, but with curt mockery. When he was the lover of a woman who

sang at the Bouffes, he carried off to the pawnbroker several pieces of household silver, but it did not occur to Mathilde to speak of this either to her father or to cousin Lachassaigne. She thought him saved the day he redeemed them, and he put them back in their drawer with a look of such tender repentance that, despite her repression of any tendency to expansiveness, she kissed the dear angelic visage—rather grimy and a little less fresh now that April was here. The angel flew off just the same on every one of those fatal spring nights, and as there is no flesh so glorious that it can pass through walls, Mathilde had to go on sitting up to draw the bolt. There were times when, with a vague look in his eyes, the angel would refuse to go to bed, would jingle the gold in his pocket, fling it down upon the table, and say that there would still be gold when there was none, smelling meanwhile of perfume, tobacco, and the sheets, and humming the song of the day. She would beg him not to waken their father, and he would insist that she find him food in the kitchen. What this adolescent said was in general incomprehensible to her; she lived in the proximity of this bland rottenness and went untouched by it, attentive to its inconsequence until the chilly hour of the first early passage of the tram.

In the end the scandal broke out and was noiselessly smothered by the agency of the headmaster, the Lachassaignes, and the Coustous family, so that Mathilde knew about it only that the police were somehow concerned and one owed great gratitude to the Lachassaignes for sending Jean off to Senegal, where the Coustous family trafficked. A half-conscious father survived this affair some few months, during which the Lachassaignes repeated that for his own good as well as the good of others, his end was to be desired. The day he died they said that his death was a deliverance.

Madame Lachassaigne knew that in Mathilde's place she would have had the delicacy not to insist upon mortuary draperies before the door, since it was they as usual who would be paying for them. But they paid the bill and even took the orphan with them to their country place at Langon, where they were spending the summer. Mathilde's duty was not to overwork their daughter, a puny and backward child. The Lachassaignes said of their cousin that "she had tact, she knew how to vanish"; and it was true that by the time the dessert was on the table she seemed to have evaporated. Even during the meal her blond hair appeared to have lost its lustre, her eyes were expressionless, her clothes were

the colour of the wainscoting. For this reason, the very dirtiest linen was washed in her presence without the slightest suspicion of this soft-spoken girl, who pretended to have no eyes but saw everything, nor ears yet heard all.

It was here that Mathilde secretly stifled to an unbearable pitch that taste for mockery which was to bring her low at the Cazenaves'. She was all dryness, aridity, a sad unwatered earth. She believed she had known one decent man in her ridiculed and betrayed father, who all his life had earned less than a taxi-driver earns and had saved in a little pot the tobacco out of the stubs of his cigarettes. She was sure that love was what she had seen in the fraternal features of the angel with soiled wings who had swooped down night after night against the scaly wall of their house. And upon the Lachassaignes she looked with harsh, unspoken cruelty. She said to herself that this couple, concerned above everything with their food, had reached the same state of fatty indecency, that fat was eating up their eyes; that of this husband and wife one would have said they were brother and sister, so like was their flesh, so identically did their chops shine with an eternal grease. She compared them to two Medusas whose contractile tentacles

could reach nothing beyond their daughter Hortense; and of Hortense, Mathilde wrote in her secret diary that "she already has pearls enough around her neck to hide the signs of scrofula." How she despised them at table when they spoke at long leisure, with great mouthfuls between every pair of words! "They re-tie the thread of their conversation only after deglutition," she wrote, "like those who never sacrifice what they say to what they eat." And she composed their epitaph: "They ate and they put by."

But beyond the privet hedge the frocklings of another couple had already turned her from the diversion afforded by the Lachassaignes. This hedge ran along the southern path so dear to Fernand Cazenave. It was there he escaped from the watchful eye of his mother. With hasty fearful glances to left and right, this fifty year old son would puff his clandestine cigarette like a schoolboy. When it chanced that Félicité swooped down upon him from one of the platforms by the aid of which she stood guard over him, he had not always time to bury his stub in a flower-bed. One day Mathilde watched him devour in his hiding-place a melon, forbidden him by the heat it sent into his bowels, and then found herself hit

full in the face by the hulls he threw over the hedge. She wrapped the damning husks in a newspaper, ran to the Cazenave house, warned Marie of Lados that a marauder was raiding the kitchen garden, and hurried back to crouch behind the hedge and listen to the echoes of the storm she had unchained.

But often also it was her turn to be spied upon. She pretended not to see this tall Cazenave, his bust like that of a moss-grown garden-god dividing the branches of the medlars and the hazel-trees. Not, indeed, that she was tempted to build castles in Spain in the sight of the maniacal gaze that hovered over her: on the banks of the Garonne young women are accustomed to gluttonous eyes, to the covetous attentions of men. But Monsieur Lachassaigne would tease her clumsily: he would maintain that Fernand Cazenave had put questions to him about her, about her nature, her tastes, had asked if it was true that her mother was a Coustous. How was Mathilde not to think, when this happened, of the dialogues she heard across the hedge and the mother and son she saw in brief moments?—only in brief moments, for they moved flank to flank like two old frigates down the southern path and reappeared only after they had made the round of the house.

This evening, lying in the darkness in such lassitude that she had not strength to raise her arm upon the eiderdown, she imagined that she could hear them. No shudder yet, but can limbs surge up out of such an abyss of weariness? Is this collapse possibly not eternal? Her body, she said to herself, was broken not by illness, but beneath the blows dealt by this man and this old woman whom she imagined at this minute in that study which had witnessed so many lugubrious evenings. "She is poking up the fire; she is putting the chairs in place; she has set the screen before the fireplace. She is saying to her son: 'I'll not kiss you good-night now. I'll be along to tuck you in.'"

Mathilde remembered how her heart had beaten on that day, when, crouching behind the privet hedge, she heard the rising storm of their mingled voices. The mother and son had finally loomed up at the end of the path. It was he who first raised his voice to accuse her of having forced him to decline the offer of the Radical Party Committee at the last election. She had not even allowed him to stand for re-election to the county council. They had been moving forward and had stopped a few yards from Mathilde. The old woman was saying:

"I wanted you to live first, do you hear? To live!"

"Oh, come, now. Duluc told me only yesterday that I was built of sand and lime. He said I should see you all in your graves. You wanted me to live—with you. That's what you wanted."

"You, built of sand and lime! Duluc was trying to flatter you. As if, ever since you had the scarlatina when you were ten years old, you had not had everything the matter with you that doctors can't understand. And that chronic bronchitis the year you were in the army! Not to speak of everything else you've got in the way of."

Another round of the garden, and when they reappeared the girl learned that they were now fighting on a different terrain:

"And the better to hold me, you wouldn't let me get married. You . . . you planned my solitude."

"You, married! My poor fellow! I'd like to see you married."

"Don't dare me!"

The old woman shrugged her shoulders. She was out of breath and was fanning her bluish face with a handkerchief. Mathilde now knew what she had not known, that upon which the mother based her assurance. Often before, after one of these quarrels, Fernand had packed everything save what was essential into a

valise, and taken the evening train to Bordeaux in order to call upon the person to whom Madame Cazenave invariably referred as his *habit*. "You know," she would say, "unfortunately, Fernand has a habit in the rue Huguerie, in Bordeaux." And she would add: "He has her well trained. I don't need to worry about him. She won't ruin him." But his "habit" had never been able to keep Fernand from home longer than three days. He would come back shivering because he had forgotten his flannels; worn with lack of sleep because he had never been able to sleep two in a bed; furious over the expense of restaurants and tips; and in general impotent and depressed because this exercise enfeebled his nervous system.

"I'll take the ten o'clock to Bordeaux to-morrow."

"As you like, my son. *Bon voyage.*"

Mathilde lay thinking of the tone in which they had screeched this threat and its response in which her fate had been determined. For, scarcely had she heard their words than in her heart she had decided that she too would take the ten o'clock train.

The time is past for self-deception. No shudder yet, but a chill such that you persuade yourself, without

much success, that it is due to the night wind and the sweat frozen on your limbs. You asked for your misfortune. No affection drew you towards that old man. A mole-like instinct urged you to hunt an exit from your subaltern existence. The worst thing about inferior situations is that they make us look for what is usable in people, and that we seek in them only their utilitarian value. You examined and interrogated each being, each event, as if it was a card, turning it up in the hope that it might be a trump. You walked in through every door that stood ajar, heedless, as captives are, whether it gave on to a meadow or an abyss. It is true that you had no notion your little game might succeed that morning when, on pretext of seeing your dentist, you took a second-class ticket to Bordeaux and chose a seat facing Fernand Cazenave.

Now Mathilde was no longer in doubt. The mortal tempest was writhing in her again, shaking and penetrating her, bent ferociously upon uprooting this living young tree. She remembered that as a child, when she had had the fever, it had been fun to make one's teeth chatter. She could have that fun now to her heart's con-

tent. How the bed shook! It had not shaken so hard the first time. From the centre of this cyclone she was strangely conscious of the peaceful night that environed her possessed body. In a world asleep and inaccessible she heard the flutter of birds wakened by the moonlight. The weakened breeze scarcely stirred the tallest pines. Alone, alone! Where was the father who came to sit beside her bed when she was ill as a child and raised her damp hair with awkward hand? In the glow of the night lamp he would sit correcting papers until the hour came when she took her potion. The dead do not help to die the living whom they have loved. She spoke aloud the name of her brother Jean who was perhaps still in this world. She should have been more insistent upon news of him, though it was true that he answered none of her letters. Where had he been wrecked, that feeble child? She was no longer shivering. Now she had moved into the furnace of a terrible fever and was all ablaze like a young pine. She saw on an arid strand, devoured by a fiery sky, a rotted mass which a wave was inundating with foam, abandoning and then flooding again, and although this face was horribly eaten away, she knew it was that of her brother Jean. But to no man

save this brother did she cry out in her delirium. She had loved nobody. She had been loved by nobody. This body was about to be consumed by death, that had never been by love. The annihilation of caresses had not prepared her for dissolution. This flesh was reaching its end without having discovered its own secret.

Chapter iv

AN hour later mother Cazenave struck a match, looked at the clock, and hearkened an instant, not to the dying and meditative night but to the breathing behind that wall of her adored son. After an inner debate she got up, let her swollen feet into a pair of slippers, put on a maroon dressing gown, and left the room with a candle in her hand. She walked down the stairs, followed a corridor, and crossed the vestibule. Here she was in enemy territory: softly though she moved up the stairs, the steps creaked beneath her weight. She stopped, listened, started again. She reached the door, blew out her needless light, and listened. The grey dawn was in the staircase. Not a moan, not a groan, but a strange sound like muffled castanets. The teeth chattered, chattered, and finally a moan arose. God alone could see what was expressed by that hearkening Medusa-head, while its rival sounded the death-rattle beyond the door. Temptation not to go in, to let come what must. The old woman hesitated, turned away, changed her mind, turned the door-knob.

"Who is that?"

"It is me, my daughter."

The night lamp no longer lighted up the room, but through the shutters there poured in a light of icy purity. Mathilde watched her nightmare come forward. Then she cried with chattering teeth:

"Go away. I don't need anything. It is only a little fever."

The old woman asked if she would take some quinine.

"No, nothing; nothing but rest; my face to the wall. Go away."

"As you like, my daughter."

That was all. She had done her duty. She had nothing to reproach herself. Let fate take its course.

Mathilde had raised her hands in a gesture of loathing, and even after the flight of the enemy, they remained upraised. She held them a moment before her eyes and was stupefied to see that they were violet. Her heart began to beat wildly, as the wings of a strangled bird beat furiously, then feebly. She tried to see her fingers close to and saw only her nails, which were already blue. But even in the exceeding anguish she did not believe in the eternity of the night she had now entered: because she was alone in the world, Mathilde did not know that

she lay on the extreme brink of life. If she had been loved, kisses would have obliged her to tear herself from the embrace of the world. She had not to loose herself, having never known a tie. No solemn voice at her bedside spoke the name of a perhaps terrible Father; none threatened her with perhaps inexorable mercy. No face in tears at being left behind allowed her to measure her gliding flight into the Shadow. She died the kindly death of those who are not loved.

Chapter v

"DO you hear what Duluc is telling you?"

Duluc was leaning against the porch rail which was wavering beneath his weight. The door to the room of the dead stood ajar. They could hear Marie of Lados blow her nose. After thirty years of the practice of medicine Duluc recognized a case of puerperal infection when he met one: was Cazenave trying to teach him his trade? There was no reason to set a watch over a woman forty-eight hours after a miscarriage.

"And what if you had got some one to sit up with her all night? The poor thing did not die of her infection: her heart gave out. Otherwise she would have been at least three days dying. I've known them to go a whole month. You remember when she had the grippe, and I examined her? I told you then that she had a weak heart."

The great glass window over the staircase was dirtying the blue sky. Fernand Cazenave freed his arm from his mother's grip while his mother repeated:

"Do you hear, darling, what Duluc is telling you?"

And for the third time, in the voice of a sleepwalker, he repeated:

"I should have had some one sit up with her."

He held out his hand to Duluc without looking at him, and slipped into the column of darkness formed by the opening of the door. He saw Marie of Lados bent over the bed, and from where he sat at a little distance on a stool, he understood that she was finishing braiding the still living hair of the dead. A passing locomotive set the water trembling in the glass, and as Madame Cazenave and Duluc, out of doors, had raised their voices, Fernand occupied his mind by an attempt to overhear what they were saying. Had he ever seen a corpse? Yes, thirty-seven years before, when his father lay outstretched in the ground floor room which was now the study. How calm his mother had been! He remembered that she had kissed him and said: "This is the beginning of a new life."

She came in with a handful of telegrams and stared at her motionless son. Voices floated up from the garden: women stood out of doors, including the good sisters from the hospital. Did Fernand wish them brought in? He made a gesture of refusal. She took his arm.

"Come, darling. You know how you are. Don't stay here; it will hurt you so."

He drew away his arm without turning his head. She went down to send away the callers, and came back to beg him again to go lie down, with her usual reasons: "Your weariness cannot help anybody now. A lot of good it will do if you fall ill. . . ."

He spoke, finally, though still without looking at her: "What time was it when you came up to listen at the door?"

It might have been four o'clock, she said.

"You told the doctor that you heard her teeth chatter."

"What I said was that on thinking about it, I thought that sound might have been her teeth chattering."

"Why didn't you go back?"

"She said she was not in pain, that she was hot, nothing more. She even refused the quinine I offered to fetch. I went away thinking everything was all right."

"Not so right as all that, since you went back again at six."

She answered not a word, being overwhelmed, not at the thought that she was being interrogated as by a judge, but at the discovery that her darling son could speak in a voice of such anguish. She comforted herself

with the assurance that "his conscience was troubling him," and repeated to herself, "he is not in sorrow." But what terror that he might feel just that! Alive, Mathilde could not have withstood the glance cast by the old woman upon her forever indifferent corpse. She went down to address her announcements of this death. Time was passing, and she could not resign herself to leaving them alone. What would she not have done to break up this *tête à tête!* She was suddenly ashamed of what she felt, and she remembered a picture in her illustrated edition of Michelet: a pope, having had his predecessor dug up, is judging and condemning him, wreaking vengeance upon his mummy. One night, only one night more, before she is in her grave. To-morrow a sheath of lead will enfold this body and Fernand's eyes will be thwarted by the thrice-sealed coffin. At last, he will never again see that face. But how ardently he was gazing at it! Never had he looked at anybody with this mute, sad attentiveness. Again she went to him, took his hand, and begged him imperiously: "Come!"

He threw her off. She went towards the door. The face asleep on the bed seemed to her so peaceful, relaxed, happy, loved. Panting, she walked down the stairs and began to address the envelopes. At this distance from

the dead she recovered her poise. Why take it so hard? Would not Fernand now belong to her alone? Marie came in to say that monsieur asked madame not to expect him to luncheon. She smiled, reassured by this exaggeration: the dead woman would not hold him long. He was not the man to alter his life for a corpse. But his most cherished pleasure was to make his mother suffer. She had been wrong to attempt to drag him away by force. If she had seemed indifferent, he would have had enough of this already. At the very worst, he would still come down to dinner.

All day long in the sitting-room with its closed shutters, veiled mirrors, and shrouded furniture, she sat receiving ladies in black whose voices rustled under their veils. All of them praised the courage of Madame Cazenave; all hoped that towards four o'clock something, though it be no more than a biscuit, would be served, either because they wished to be able to assure themselves that they had not wasted their day, or because the dead awoke in them the instinct of age-old rites, the vague desire of those libations which appease the dead. But they were forced to fast until they had raised the siege. When Félicité had seen the last of them to the door, she asked Marie if monsieur had come down. The

servant answered that monsieur was still up-stairs and had ordered her to bring him at seven o'clock a cup of bouillon containing a poached egg, his dressing-gown and slippers, and the bottle of armagnac brandy. She had always said monsieur was a Péloueyre: he was always pretending to be mean, but in truth there was not a better . . . Marie of Lados felt she had better not go on, although she could see in the darkened vestibule only the motionless mass of her mistress.

"Go back into your kitchen, fool."

Félicité gave this order in the same tone as, forty years earlier, old Péloueyre had used to Marie of Lados when the exhausted girl had sunk into a chair and he had cried: "Get up, you lazy slut!" He could not bear to see a servant seated. In those days Marie even ate standing, between the service of courses to her masters. She had the right to a chair only at night, and then only before the spinning wheel. Now those sheets of rude hemp, spun by servants long dead, were wrapped about the unsuffering body overhead.

Madame Cazenave dined alone, her ears straining to catch the sound, which she confidently expected from one minute to the next, of the stairs creaking under Fernand's foundering step. As she got up from table

she thought surely she had heard it and was already composing her face in a mask of indifference when she realized that the eight o'clock express was passing and she had heard the creaking of the garret door as it sprung open.

"To-morrow evening he will be beaten."

She threw a shawl over her shoulders and went out into the garden. The east wind was blowing the station smoke towards her, but the odour of the limes and syringas was stronger than that of the coal. A last flutter of wings arose and died in the bird-filled trees. The old woman stared at the shutters through which filtered a funereal glow. She said half aloud: "You'll be done in to-morrow, my chick." Near the magnolia bush she frightened a nightingale. The crickets ceased their chirping as she passed them on the edge of the dry and dusty meadow. She tried to imagine her son shivering in the morning light beside last night's corpse. He who was so fearful of death must look very strange up there, indeed.

Chapter vi

YES, he was looking very strange, indeed. Wrapped in his dark dressing-gown, the nape of his neck on the back of an armchair, he sat staring fixedly at Mathilde. A glass of armagnac which he had already emptied and re-filled, stood on the low table beside him. Moths were fluttering around the two candles and beating against their shadows on the ceiling. He spoke Mathilde's name once, and his mother would not have known that to be his voice. He got up, went over to the bed, brushed away a fly, contemplated the eternal beauty of death. To himself he said again and again, blind! blind! without realizing that he was seeing this face for the first time because death had wiped from it every stain: gone was the hard, strained, arid expression of a poor girl reduced to calculation, contempt, and mockery; gone the hunted game, squared off and facing the huntsmen; gone the tracked and necessitous visage. Had she been happy and adored, perhaps Mathilde might have worn in life the face he saw, inundated with peace, a face delivered.

"Blind . . . blind." Touched slightly by alcohol, Fernand hearkened to the welling up of the sorrow within him; drunken, he welcomed this mysterious pain. Within him a stream was freeing itself from the ice of a once interminable winter. He had lived fifty years of his life before suffering because of another being. What most men discover in their adolescence he was at last finding out this night. A bitter enchantment chained him to this corpse. He came forward again and touched its cheek with a finger. Long after he had drawn it back the finger still retained the impression of an infinite chill.

He did not know what it was that was going out of that face in the dreadful moment when one begins to say of the dead, "he is changing." Fernand went out and leaned over the staircase lighted up by the night. The same train passed which Mathilde had heard in the hour of her death. The house vibrated like an immense body as it had done during the sleepless hours of her fear. Fernand remembered that he had promised her to have shutters put up on the lower floor. He repeated it, taking comfort from the thought that he had shown her some kindness during her pregnancy. He went back into the room. Was he imagining that odour, or was it given

off by that thing which now repelled him? and to what did the sheet seem to be clinging? He opened wide the window and flung back the shutters. Fernand was not one of those who, rather than sleep, are accustomed to raise their eyes to the stars. He felt as if he had come upon a miracle, had intruded upon a mystery, when he saw the mute ascension of the worlds. That disquiet which so lately had urged him to cut out maxims now waxed in him. Between the window and the bed, between those dead worlds and this dead flesh, Fernand stood, a poor living thing.

Daring no longer to approach the corpse, he stood by the window and breathed in the saturated night. This grassy odour, these dark rustlings, put into his mind the idea of a happiness he might have tasted, but which now he was never to know. His fists clenched of themselves: he would not consent to the annihilation of Mathilde. Had his mother come in at that moment he would have cried out to her: "I will not have Mathilde dead!" in the tone in which, as a child, he would insist that every one take to bed because he was ill, or, on his birthday, that the hobby-horse be taken apart for him, that he be served strawberries in December, that he be

allowed to play with an old rifle which might go off and kill him. Remembering one of the maxims he had cut out concerning the immortality of the soul, he shrugged his shoulders: Mathilde's soul! what did he care about her soul? To think there were imbeciles who consoled themselves with that! What he wanted back, alive, was that body. He wanted to see joy dawn in Mathilde's fear-haunted, mistrustful face. He who had been incapable of escaping from himself even into sensuality, understood too late that our body itself seeks and discovers its pleasure outside itself, embedded in the flesh of another body to which ours brings happiness.

Fernand felt his nails on his forehead. A bird sobbed so close to the house that he started back with beating heart, saying to himself, "That may be the *frégasse*"—the mysterious bird of the moors that is drawn not by the houses upon which death has descended, but those which death is nearing. The night was at its full. There would be no train again before five o'clock. No breath could stir the leaves out of their slumber. Even the meadow gave up nothing more living than the sleepy murmur of a vegetable dream. Fernand stepped towards, and then back from, the wardrobe, for he had seen in the glass his frightening face, as if the corruption which

was engaged in Mathilde ten feet away were already at work in him. Again that sob in the night, so near that it seemed to be in the room. It must have come down the chimney, in the chimney, perhaps! Fernand stared at the sheet of black iron: did he not hear sinister wings? He backed towards the door. He was certain of it. He went back to his mother. It was not in vain that the old woman, seated on her bed in the other wing of the house, had repressed an impulse to run to the aid of the ingrate. She too had heard the night bird, and had said blissfully to herself, "He'll not be long now. I know him."

But on the landing, to which Fernand had hastened, a gleam was moving, filling the hollow of the staircase. Marie of Lados came forward with her lamp. She was in her Sunday dress, her head caught in a black kerchief, below which hung the long lobes of her ancient ears. She had been thinking monsieur must be getting sleepy. He took the lamp from her hands and fled so quickly down the stairs that it went out. When he reached his room he undressed in the dark and dropped off to sleep while his mother was snuffing out her candle, resigned not to be kissing him good-night because she had heard through the wall the heavy breathing of her

beloved. Up above, Marie of Lados was not reclining against the back of the armchair; she was sitting up straight and throwing a strange shadow on the wall. Her toothless mouth was moving rapidly. The beads of the rosary lay in the hollow of her apron like grains of corn and barley.

Chapter vii

EARLY as the hour was, the sun was already beating fiercely down when Félicité Cazenave, her face veiled, walked through the eastern gate and along the road that ran beside the Bordeaux-Cette railway line. She strode forward with her chest out, her hands on her stomach, her skirt trailing in the dust and grime. She followed the high road a short way and then turned right to the cemetery. There, instead of crossing the threshold of the dead, she tapped with her forefinger on the glass door of their guardian. A sullen voice—the voice of a man who had long since given up hope of a gratuity—cried without awaiting her question that Monsieur Cazenave had not been seen hereabout in six days. She went off, panting but relieved, and in her struggle with the dead she counted this a point in her favour. Throughout the week following the funeral—which Fernand had attended like a man in a daze, bearing all the visible marks of a pain which had astounded the village—he had not once omitted to take

to his wife an awkward bouquet with stems excessively short, like those cut by children. At last he seemed to be coming to his senses.

To herself Félicité said, this is the beginning. She surrendered to her need for reassurance. But at bottom how weary she was! She was a woman of positive action, and the weapons she habitually employed were worthless against a phantom. She was powerless save against living flesh. The tactics of the vanished wife disconcerted her: the ghost crouched within Fernand, inhabiting him as if he were a fortress. Of course Félicité had forseen the rancour of her beloved son, his hatred, and even the ten-fold multiplication of the need to make her suffer which had always possessed him. (When he was a child it was his habit to drive his knee against the back of her chair until she cried out for mercy.) But now this had ceased to be the form of his resistance and had been replaced by an indifference, a spiritual absence, which threw out her game, blocked every manœuvre.

As she pushed in the eastern gate she felt herself weary, sweating under the harness of her mourning. She went forward into the strong odour of the old box-wood which surrounded the machinery of the well

where Grisette, the donkey, stood asleep on her mound of dung. Moved by habit, Félicité jabbed the point of her sunshade into the leathery hide, and the animal snorted and trotted off. "What difference does it make," she said to herself, "whether he goes to the cemetery or into the fields to do his day-dreaming, since he goes on thinking about her?" That morning, as on all mornings, his shoulders a little bowed and his head covered by a straw hat bought three years earlier and dyed since, he had gone out in his strong-smelling alpaca coat. It was when noon had brought him back and seated him facing his mother that he would seem to her farthest away. Nothing took with him any more: he no longer reacted to words which but a short time before would have rendered him beside himself with rage.

On the platform in the study whence she could watch for the coming of her son, Félicité established herself like an old queen dispossessed of her realm. Her knitting hung unnoticed over her stomach while her eyes fixed themselves upon the narrow gate. The eleven o'clock express told her that Fernand would not be long now. Each of the beloved's returns was awaited as if it was to mark the end of this mortal enchantment. "He will come back to me," the mother repeated to herself. "A

man does not change when he's fifty." It never occurred to her that he had not changed at all. He was still the bad-tempered little boy she had nursed: he would not allow that Mathilde was dead, and death itself could not disconcert his ferocious exigence.

She stepped down from the platform, and as her son was still not there, she repeated to herself for the hundredth time, wandering about the room: "Let me see, let me think. I went upstairs. I knocked on the door. I asked if she was in pain. She said there was nothing she wanted. . . . Yes, but when you got back to your room you looked up the word *infection* in the medical dictionary."

Lost in these thoughts she was surprised by the sound of Fernand's step in the vestibule and heard him ask Marie if "it was ready." As there was still a quarter of an hour before luncheon, he went into the garden. From behind the curtain, Félicité watched him. He was standing in the middle of the path. What was he staring at? His mother was sure that he was seeing in his mind's eye that room in the rue Huguerie where, one day a month, he was expected by his *habit*. Bath towels hung always from a cord outside the window of that room. She called him her old skinflint because

there was no way of getting out of him a farthing more than the established rate. Such was the story of Fernand Cazenave and love.

He raised his eyes to Mathilde's windows. "Still," he said to himself, "while she was pregnant she could see that I loved her, that I took her part against my mother. But she believed it was because of the child." In vain did he try to recall all the occasions when he had been in the least kind to her. At that very minute he was obsessed by the memory of the last journey they made together to Bordeaux. How ill-tempered he had been because of all the money she had spent for the layette. "In my day," he had grumbled, "a mother would not have wanted to buy the least thing. She would have thought it disgraceful not to knit everything herself." Mathilde had dragged herself beside him, mute and brow-beaten. They had gone into a restaurant of somewhat better appearance than that to which he usually took her. She had unfolded her napkin and smiled, finally, happy and relaxed. "Sorry, sir, we serve only *à la carte,*" the head-waiter had said in answer to Fernand's question about the *table d'hôte.* Whereupon Fernand, having glanced furiously at the card, had stood up and called for his hat and coat, and they had

walked the length of the restaurant while others whispered and the waiters sneered. They had gone up the burning pavement of the Allées de Tourny, Fernand pretending not to see that Mathilde was crying.

He went into the house. Madame Cazenave got up on her benumbed legs and went to meet him in the vestibule.

"How hot you must be, my poor dear."

She tried to wipe his dripping face with her handkerchief, but he turned away.

"You are soaked through. Better go change; you'll take cold."

And since he continued to say nothing, she added:

"I got a change ready for you. It is lying on your bed."

Tactless, and suddenly losing her temper, she followed him into the study to cry: "If you get ill, who will have to look after you? who but me?"

At that he looked at her finally, and said: "Well, you need only stand by and let me croak, too."

She wavered beneath the blow and did not know what to answer. They crossed the kitchen without lifting, as

they had been used to do, the lids off the pots, and went into the dark, smelly dining-room.

"You are not eating."

Sorrowfully she repeated that "you are not eating" which, on the moors, is the presage of illness and death. He who has lost his appetite has lost his taste for that which is best in all the world. There is left only to lie down and wait for the end. Marie of Lados added:

"Madame has no appetite, either."

They were not now pretending as they had done when Mathilde was alive. She had kept house then, and in order to constrain her to resign this office, mother and son, by common accord, would make a face over every dish.

Félicité was once more alone in the study: the beloved had not followed her there. This was the coffee hour when, only so recently, they would sit side by side on the black leather sofa, her head resting on her son's shoulder. They would read the newspaper together, grinning like school children, and when his young wife opened the door they would start back and separate, pretending to have been interrupted in the middle of a word. It seemed to Félicité she could still hear the

tone of voice in which the injured schoolmistress, the enemy, asked: "Am I disturbing you?" . . . "Oh, no, not at all. We've said all we had to say to one another."

These skirmishes had been the old woman's joy, they had been her life. Where was he burrowing now, the beloved? He was exhausted and must have gone to lie down. These long wanderings wore him out. His lungs and his heart were too weak to endure much more of this strain. Distraught and unhappy, she longed to run to him. But to what end? Now he shot the bolt upon her as if she had been Mathilde.

A ray of sunlight filtered through the half closed shutters and gleamed on the frame of a photograph, dear to Félicité, which stood upon the mantelshelf. One month after the wedding, mother, son, and daughter-in-law had posed before an itinerant photographer. Two seconds before the click of the camera Fernand had dropped his wife's arm and taken his mother's. And ever after, in this picture, Félicité and her son stood broadly smiling while in the background stood the young woman, sad of face and arms loosely hanging.

Madame Cazenave could not resist gazing again at this witness to those happy days. She went over to it

and stiffened suddenly as she saw that the frame was empty. Glancing at her table, she saw lying there the shining scissors with which Fernand had once cut out his maxims—and she saw her waste paper basket. Heavens! was not that, through the braided straw, her own smile there, her nose in the air, her stomach? She threw herself upon the photograph thus destined for the dust bin. The wretch had cut out the picture of Mathilde, and he was doubtless carrying it in his pocket-book over his heart. Probably when he was alone he touched it fervently and happily with his lips. For two weeks the old woman had suffered everything without a cry; but this material sign of her rejection was too much for her. She was invaded by a mad anger which broke all the dikes within her and made her rheumatic fingers shake. She stamped her feet as she had done that day when she had shouted to Mathilde: "You shall not have my son! You will never have him!" She went towards the door, and in her face was that strained, stupid look of a woman carrying a revolver or a phial of vitriol under her cloak. It may be that there are not several loves. It may be that love is one. This woman was dying because she did not possess her son, dying of the desire for possession, for

spiritual domination, which is sharper than the desire which urges the commingling, the interpenetration, the reciprocal devouring of two young bodies.

The stifling mother flung back the shutters and saw the southern sun weighing heavily upon the arid garden. The sandy paths that ran between the dusty lawns were ashen. The panting of a starting train was like the breathing of an oppressed being. Raging furiously the old woman rolled on her haunches to the staircase; from step to step she lost more breath, but she succeeded nevertheless in pulling herself up to the ingrate's room. It was empty. There were phials everywhere, and there was an odour of urine. Félicité caught sight of her purple cheeks in the glass and was frightened. Where would she find the traitor but in the room of the enemy? She went down, her weak knees quaking, followed the hall, crossed the dark vestibule, another hall, and started finally up the stairs that led to the room of the all-powerful dead. For a few seconds she stood exhausted before the closed door, as she had done that night while death came forward. She listened. God did not see this time, as on that night, amazement, hope, and then an immense criminal joy spread over the hearkening old face. She stood shaking, attentive to a

light snore followed by a hiccough, a strangled breath she knew well, for it was this enchanting music that came at night through the wall, the sensible sign of the beloved presence. On those nights she had lived, hanging by this breath, so that nothing was sweeter to her than her nights of sleeplessness. But to-day the dead had stolen from her the slumber of her cherished son. A tide of fresh fury swept over her, blinded her, and she turned the knob.

Félicité blinked. The two wide-open windows had delivered up the room to the flames of this savage June day. In two vases on the low table stood lilies which saturated the chamber as if it were a greenhouse. Between the vases, in a frame of shells (*Souvenir of Arcachon*) too wide for it, was the piously cut out photograph of Mathilde; and spread out before the frame was the engagement ring with its tiny diamond, the wedding ring, and a pair of worn white gloves. And at the feet of these relics, capsized in the armchair, Fernand sprawled with his head hanging down and slumber at his throat. A blue-bottle droned; it knocked against ceiling and mirrors until it discovered the open window. Then its droning became lost in the conflagration of the sky.

Félicité's boots creaked. Fernand shifted in the chair. She stopped, took a step towards the table, and sketched with her hands the gesture of Polyeuctes, the breaker of idols. To spit upon that picture, tear it, stamp upon it! . . . She did not dare. Fernand's head had fallen upon his arm which lay folded on the table, and his mother saw only a great ball of wiry grey hair. She felt her perspiring face grow cold. Her sight became clouded. The blood rustled in her ears as if, in a shell, she were hearing the sea. She would have liked to speak because her tongue was heavy. She could not tell if what she was hearing came from the crickets, the flies, or her arteries. An invisible hand pushed her towards the bed and forced her down upon the couch where Mathilde had suffered, had died. The old woman flattened out like an animal, and waited. Her eyes opened; her breath came again: the dark bird had veered off. She drew breath. Her son slept on with that sound of an encumbered throat. The continued presence of danger left her shaking and sweating. And she brooded now with eyes less hateful than fearful over the altar embraced by this prostrate man.

Chapter viii

DURING the evening meal Fernand no longer felt himself in the accustomed atmosphere of periods of hostility. The very sight of his mother surprised him: she who had always held herself so erect, in an attitude so powerful and even majestic, sat now slumped over with flabby, grey cheeks. He felt no pity for her, but rather impatience because of the blow he was preparing to deal her and his fear that she might fail to endure it without crying out. She received it more coldly than he had hoped: what she had seen that day had been to her a warning sign. Therefore she did not tremble when Marie of Lados came to ask for a pair of sheets with which to make up monsieur's bed in poor madame's room. She gave the servant the key of the cupboard, pressed her lips to her son's forehead, and picked up her candlestick. Fernand thought she was playing a cautious game. But she was playing no game at all. Knowing herself betrayed in the heart of her son, she was not astonished to see the traitor pass over to the enemy bag and baggage.

But once she had retired to her room, the silence to which she was unaccustomed filled her with fear. It seemed to her that now for the first time she heard the creaking of this house which, for reasons of his timber business, her husband, Numa Cazenave, had built opposite the railway station. When she was widowed, there was interposed between her and the dangers that lived in the darkness the raucous slumber of her darling beyond the wall. Furtive footsteps, the rumbling on the iron bridge over the river, the moaning of the equinox, the nightingales in the lilacs,—none of these had prevailed against the sound of the sleeper's breath. The few hours which Fernand was forced to spend with Mathilde had but lent greater price to his reconquered presence. Yet on this night, stretched out within the walls which had surrounded her every night for half a century, Félicité Cazenave felt herself a stranger. The last train that would go by before the dawn shook the window panes. There would be nothing now save the interminable goods trains, but as they rarely whistled they became easily part of one's dream. It is scarcely worth while now to sleep with your lips pressed to the wall behind which your son is no longer breathing his catarrhal res-

piration. Turn upon your other side. Shut your eyes. Try not to think. . . . Suddenly she sat up.

"There is somebody walking in the garden."

Was some one really walking there? Now and then the wind stirred the leaves so gently that one would swear it was the sound of footsteps. Félicité scratched a match, heard nothing, and blew out the match. But in her mind's eye she could see the vast defenceless house and its many shutterless windows. She imagined an evil face flattened against a pane while a hand moved over it with a silent diamond. How was she to get Fernand to put up those shutters she had urged him to refuse Mathilde? The best way would be to present it as the dead woman's wish; his devotion would fulfil that wish. At that moment Félicité admitted to herself that this night's anguish was the nightly anguish of Fernand's wife. Coincidence, chance: the old woman shrugged her shoulders and scolded herself. But tales told her by servants and stored deep in her memory, awoke out of the depth of her terrified childhood. No, no, the dead do not avenge themselves. Mathilde was rotting moment by moment in the third vault to the left against the back wall. And yet Félicité's eyes roved in the darkness en-

quiringly as if finally, through the world of appearance, she had learned to sense an unknown swarm of people. She forced herself to laugh, for she had believed all her life only in the palpable. She was born at a time when nothing but roads of sand bound the moors to the rest of the world. The Reign of Terror had driven out the priests. Félicité's mother had celebrated her first communion on the day she married. At the dawning of the last century the children of the moors worshipped only the implacable sun, and knew only this all-powerful god, the devourer of the stunted pines, the brief, rapid, evasive god who lit up in his train an immense troop of torches.

Coming down a little later than usual, because sleep had come only with the dawn, she saw Fernand's hat and stick on the wood-box. Why had he not gone out? Marie of Lados reported that he was still asleep. Madame could see for herself that the blinds were still drawn. Her eyes fixed upon those blinds, Félicité suffered as if the other woman were holding him in her arms. She said under her breath, "I am mad." Had she ever known such torture while Mathilde lived? She repeated to herself, "You know she is not up there." True she was not up there, but none the less he who had fled her while she

lived was now chained to her couch. Félicité could not remember ever to have suffered so basely, not even on the morning after the wedding. Already on that day she had felt certain of victory. One week after they were married, and while they were still at Biarritz, a letter from Fernand had filled her with such joy that she had re-read it often enough to have its most beautiful passages by heart: "You were right; only a mother can understand the sort of man I am. All other women are strangers. They believe they love us, and they think only of themselves. Our health is less important than their pleasure. They think it proper that we should spend any amount of money on their absurd fantasies. The most exacting are always those who were dying of hunger before they were married. Do you remember that hotel at Bayonne near the railway station? Maybe it can't be called luxurious, but we were well enough suited there. Well, Mathilde would not stay there because she claimed that she saw a crushed bed-bug, and the pail smelled bad. So we had to go to one of those hotels I detest, where a lot of people who give you no service shrug their shoulders when you give them as much as a franc by way of tip. Mathilde seems to think me stingy and talks of no one but herself. Nothing that interests me

interests her. And to think I used to complain of your excessive solicitude for me! I give you my word that she cares nothing about my health. It is not her fault if I haven't yet become ill. When we travel she sends a mortal draught through the railway carriage. She gets up at night, while I am asleep, to open the windows. I don't need to tell you that the pains in my left shoulder have started again. She makes fun of everything constantly, criticizes our family habits, says it is disgusting not to wash at night—as if that were any use, since you have to begin all over again in the morning. I can't tell you a fraction of what I have to bear. Fear nothing, mother mine, your son will do his duty to the end. . . ."

On a summer morning very like this, that letter had arrived to fill the mother wolf with anxiety and happiness at the same time. What beautiful memories remained with her of the weeks that followed: a thousand signs of the widening rupture, to that day when, after a night whose happenings remained forever secret, Fernand said, "You will make up my bed again in my old room." She had awaited this joy without believing it could come so soon. She saw herself again in the aired room, sitting on the edge of the narrow, boy's bed where Marie of Lados had put the sheets with their odour of

mint and fresh water. And to-day, alas! . . . The sun was driving away the mist. The birds had gone, but there was a grasshopper about. Marie was pulling the shutters to with a banging sound. The south wind, with its smell of consuming pine, burned the skin. In the direction of the moors the sky was a smoky russet. From one second to the next the thirst of the tortured earth increased. Péliou was hollowing out with paws and muzzle a cold tomb for his sleep. As on the night before, Félicité could hear the beating waves of her blood, and she stood motionless because her least gesture might be a beckoning to death. She mumbled words like a madwoman and Péliou pricked up his ears, thinking they were meant for him. She imagined her son's corpse lying on the bed where Mathilde's had lain, and she was seized by a feeling of panic which drove her over to the burning steps. The breasts of the lizards were pulsating in an odour of geranium. As she stood on the first step a window-sash was pushed out and Fernand appeared. He said, "Lunch is ready, mother."

He was alive; he was there, standing in the broiling sun. The flat straw hat, pulled down low, hid his face. How light the heavy old woman felt herself as she rose towards her motionless beloved! Brief joy: when she

saw him close to, and he had taken off his hat in greeting, she stifled a cry before the signs of ravage in that face. In what a state the dead had given him back to her! His lips were whiter than if they had drunk vinegar, and his eyes were as bloodshot as the eyes of an old dog. When he had sat down at table, he looked at his mother. They were doubtless afraid of one another through luncheon. But whereas she never took her eyes from his face, he soon retired within himself, summoned by an inner vision from which nothing could henceforth distract him. Marie of Lados exclaimed "*qué calou!*"—what heat! and said the country was on fire in the neighbourhood of Landiras and that no warning bell had been rung because it was too far from the village. But what tocsin could have torn Fernand from the memory of his first night in the room where Mathilde had died?

Chapter ix

IT had been almost agreeable at first to lie down between the vague white wings of the curtains that hung from their rod. The windows were open and the night was breathing like a familiar being. Nothing brought to mind the funereal watch, or the bird of death; on the contrary, stretched out with closed eyes upon his back, his hand joined on the sheets, his feet side by side, like Mathilde in death, he felt himself drifting between two walls of water towards the abyss of an endless rest. She was present, not in the room but in him, woven into his flesh, his vigilant flesh that lay remembering its nuptial nights; and slowly his thoughts too awoke and turned fixedly upon the time when he felt the terrified body of Mathilde beside him. What he saw was at once so pitiful and so grotesque that he shook his head and moaned aloud. Like all of his race, he ought to have died without knowing what it was to love—like all of his race, like most men.

Destiny had played a strange trick: it had stirred in

this old man waters which had lain still at heaven knows what depths. And now the stagnant stream had thrust itself forward and was moving slowly through his being. He did not know what it was. His forebears had been the jealous lovers of pines and vines. His father Numa Cazenave, had asked when he died to be covered over with the rich soil of a bit of earth he had loved above all others. When he was about to take a wife, he had first to ask a friend what one did with a woman. Marriage had assured to all of Fernand's dead an increase of fortune and the continuity of possession. To inevitable death, they had opposed the eternal family. Almost always a son had sufficed, one son only, to perpetuate the thin thread of life that was to bear to the end of time a patrimony ceaselessly augmented by dower and inheritance. At no moment in the life of this race had a passion diverted the powerful stream. All their women, Péloueyres as well as Cazenaves, had been of those who whisper to their husbands, "make haste."

Yet it is inevitable that a spot of rust appear on a link in the living chain, and that it do its work. Unhappy those who come after! Oh, poor hearts as yet unborn! My little ones, what will you take from me? This gnawing enmity of Fernand against his mother is

horrible: and yet! . . . It was from her he had received the heritage of flame, while at the same time the tender jealousy of the mother had rendered the son impotent to nourish the secret fire within himself. In order not to lose him, she had wished him a cripple. She had been able to hold him only because she had stripped him of everything. She had reared him up in distrust, in an idiotic contempt of woman. From his fifteenth year onward he learned only of two kinds: "Those who want to get their hooks into you," and "those who spread disease."

It was true that a person given to love would not have been stopped by this teaching. But Fernand was the offspring of those peasants one meets on the road after a market or a fair has been held, striding empty-handed and like kings in the middle of the highway, while behind them, more laden with baskets than a donkey, struggles the harassed female. And also, Fernand, whose pride was the subject of constant cultivation, was the sort of lad who, fearful of not being liked, always maintains that every woman has her price. He was sure that "the men to whom they seem to be giving themselves freely spend more on them than on the others." He would say also, "With me, they know it

is so much. But no flowers, no gifts, no incidental expenses."

But here he was, lying on Mathilde's bed and seeing a glorious day burn the southern path, and behind the humming privet hedge, a young body among the droning wasps. . . . Do you believe that if you hadn't sought to arm yourself against your mother you would have dared spread wide the branches and drawn towards you that carnal prey with its odour of honey? It is true that the hunger of vengeance first excited you—though it only concealed another more secret hunger; and that hunger you discover now, when it can no longer be assuaged, when the prey of the flesh, the perfumed prey, has dissolved and become that horrible thing which has not even a name. . . .

He got up, and in his bare feet walked about the room, knocking against the furniture. He spoke aloud: "She loved me, since I was able to make her suffer." Then he shook his large head and grumbled, "No, no, it was not a question of love." When he wept he made the same ugly face as in his childhood. Motionless a moment, he gnawed his nails and said again, "Another man? another?" Until now he had never been jealous;

his unassailed pride had always preserved him from that. Another man in Mathilde's life? He was about to suffer, but he remembered what his mother had repeated a hundred times: "She is decent; you can't take that from her. That is all she has in her favour, but she has that." And she would add, alluding to the *demoiselle* Coustous who had been Mathilde's mother, "For once it can't be said, 'like father, like son'."

Fernand did not know that in praising her daughter-in-law the old woman was thinking of a "home from their honeymoon" luncheon given by the Marlet ladies, when the master of a school sat on Mathilde's left. He was said to be a poet and was giving advice to one of the Marlet old maids, who wrote verse. It had seemed to Félicité that Mathilde, during the meal, was drinking in the words of this dark and so presentable young man. Only God knows if there was not in Mathilde a moment of relaxation, of abandon, a secret germ, an imperceptible inclination towards him who was lowering his voice to quote a poem at the tumultuous end of the luncheon. Laughter was decomposing the faces of these moor-dwellers. He was doubtless already dreaming of a passion such as one reads about in books. When the coffee had been served, Félicité pressed him awkwardly

to recite a poem; he had refused, and she had begged him at least to copy a few lines of verse in her daughter-in-law's album. Mathilde saw in this a warning signal. The old woman had never concealed her game, and Mathilde had flattered herself that she "could always hear her coming from afar in her great *sabots*." The schoolmaster never got so much as a glance, and when he came to call on the Cazenaves, Mathilde refused to go down to the drawing-room. Fernand could sleep in peace: he had never been betrayed even in thought by the miserable child who had been able only to mark points, to ward off blows.

As a matter of fact, he was no longer thinking of that. His life was spread like a grey desert before his eyes. How had he been able to cross all that sand without dying of thirst? He was now discovering the torture of that thirst which for so many years he had not known. Mathilde had died before knowing she was thirsty. She was dead; but he was alive. One spring dries up, he thought; thousands of springs bubble: what was more easily replaced than a Mathilde? Loving for the first time, he rebelled against the mirage which drowns the entire universe in darkness only that a single being be

bathed in light. This old, decomposing child, accustomed to grasp at everything that would bring him pleasure, to profit by whatever happened, repeated to himself that Mathilde had been for him the occasion of a thrilling discovery, and that he would profit thereby with some one else. Whom else? In his mind's eye he saw the towels drying at that window in the rue Huguerie. Whom else? In the tiny universe of his baseness, in the mesh, the sticky web, which his mother, for his protection, had spun about him for fifty years, he beat and struggled like a fat entangled fly.

He struck a match and stood with upraised candle, gazing at himself in the glass. It is the cult that creates the idol. Mathilde, perhaps, the unique Mathilde, might have grown attached to this irritable old god who was the product of forty years of maternal adoration. Too late! He went to the window. A few drops of rain must have fallen, for he smelled the odour of the bruised earth. He lay down flat upon his stomach on the floor with both arms folded under his face, and he would have slept there if a twinge had not forced him back again into bed. Slumber finally delivered him. The first fluttering birds wakened him no more than if his body had been a corpse.

Chapter x

IT was during the luncheon which followed this night that Félicité Cazenave, seated opposite the old man who was her son, thought of him for the first time as something other than her property, stolen by the dead and to be retrieved by violence. At that moment her love began to be like the love of most mothers, who demand nothing in exchange for what they give. In this mute old woman who sat and forced herself to eat, an upheaval took place; conquered passion agreed at last to abandon its sacred privileges: let him first be happy! Had the power to do it then been hers, she would have recalled Mathilde from the shores of the dead. The intoxication of renunciation displayed before her love a perspective which dazzled her. Such is the instinct of love which refuses to die, that when the earth slips from beneath it, when its familiar sky has been shattered, it invents another sky and another earth. In such an hour he who is no longer loved murmurs to the being who no longer loves: "You will never see me. I shall not be in your

way. I shall live in your shadow. I will build about you a protecting wall of which you will never be conscious." Thus Félicité Cazenave, intoxicated with her defeat, flung renunciation like so much food to her famished passion. She broke their silence to say in a tone of supplication:

"You are not eating, darling. You ought to eat."

He answered without raising his head: "You are not eating either."

And he added, prompted by the spoiled child's habit: "I was never able to eat alone with some one sitting and staring at me."

"But I am eating, darling; I am very hungry."

And although there was a lump in her throat, she tried to swallow a mouthful. As they got up from table, and Fernand started towards Mathilde's wing of the house, she called to him:

"I have something to say to you, my child."

He hesitated a second and then, grumbling, followed her into the study.

"What do you want with me?"

She had gone over to push the shutters open. When she turned around and saw her son she lost countenance.

"I am worried about you, darling," she stammered. "The life you are leading is not good for you. You are churning your blood, as Marie says. You ought to engage in something, see your political friends. . . . You are a mature man. The municipal elections are only a few months off. . . ."

He growled that politics had been over for him long ago, as she had wished. And since she said nothing, he asked if that was all she had to say to him. She took his arm and said passionately:

"I don't want you to let yourself die. I shall not let you die."

"As you let her?"

That death was not her fault, she cried. Nothing had forewarned them of the infection. Why not believe what Duluc said? There was no reason to sit up with her.

"For that matter, didn't I go up to see her that night?"

"I know, I know."

"I knocked on her door. I asked her if she was in pain. She answered that there was nothing she needed. Even so, it would have been too late to do anything for her: her heart failed her. Duluc has told you that a hundred times. Neither you nor I could do anything. It

takes several days for infection to bring death. But your wife had heart disease."

She came and went in the room, talking as much to convince herself as her son, and she raised her voice with each remark as if hoping to be overheard by some one invisible, but listening. He had moved away from the door during her protest, and now he covered his face with his hands. Finally he cried:

"You killed her. It was you who killed her little by little, day after day."

She answered angrily: "That is not true. I was defending myself against her. I had a right to do that. And in any case, there were two of us."

"What do you mean?"

"Which of us two hurt her the most? Answer me that!"

Choler swept through her like fire and consumed all the new-born desire for renunciation. The question was no longer one of self-sacrifice but of quelling a rebellious son, of being, as she had always been, stronger than he. She shrieked:

"But look at yourself, my lad: only your mother could possibly endure you. For fifty years I have fought with you, I, your mother; and I wonder that I am

still alive. When I saw her come into this house—oh, the poor creature!—I knew she wouldn't last long. In less than a year you . . ."

"Shut up! Not another word!"

She started back at the sight of that ashen face, those trembling lifted arms of her son. As he came forward she fell back against the wall and smiled at the madman, all her being seeming to fling to him the challenge of that other mother: "Strike at the womb."

Terrified by what he had nearly done, he stood still. The cloud rose from his brain and he stared at the panting old woman of whom he was born and whom he had been about to strike. He gazed at the poor breathless surrendered body, and through the flinty shell burst the deeply buried tenderness of childhood in a single miserable cry:

"Mamma!"

She had crumpled down upon a sofa and he sat now with his head resting upon the shoulder she offered it. He took refuge again in this living shelter, because for him there was no other harbour on earth. As a despairing man who seeks to abandon the earth does nevertheless lie clinging to its step-motherly bosom, beating his head against it, sobbing with violence from his

entrails, so hapless Fernand embraced and clung to his old mother. And she, crushed, her strength gone, savoured with closed eyes their happiness of an instant. She knew he would recover and withdraw himself soon, and that this passing weakness would be a fresh grievance. Ah, how she could have wished that moment to become eternity! Her arm was growing numb under the weight of the heavy head, but she was a mother who, on winter nights, because her child could not otherwise sleep, had lain awake for hours with her arm outside her bed, tortured, abandoning her frozen hand to the little executioner.

She sat a long time with her lips to the forehead of her old son, as she had done in the days when, like a young animal mother, she had sniffed, in this same gesture, the odour of her new-born son. No, no, she would provoke him no longer. She sat enraptured by the new sky that seemed to have opened for her. She demanded nothing of this sensibly present son: she would replace in him the taste for life, bear her child a second time. Thus the mother surrendered herself to the illusion that her beloved could, by following her example, try to be born again. She did not understand that the object of her own passion was there, living at her knee, and

that she asked no more than this to affront destiny; while he, the decomposing child, who for half a century had broken his toys one after the other, had lost his last plaything at the very moment when he had discovered its incalculable price. Look at him, poor woman: already he is moving to his feet, wiping his sweating brow with the back of his hand; and now you hear his footfalls dying away in the dead house.

Chapter xi

THERE followed several days of relaxation, because the sky too had relaxed its ardour. For a whole week storms roved over an almost deserted landscape (this being the time of year when there is nothing to do save to leave the sun and the vine face to face). Even the trains seemed to cut their path with difficulty through those dog days. People said that between La Réole and Tonneins the heat had expanded the rails. One night, finally, a swishing sound awoke mother and son. The leaves breathed in so avidly these first drops that it was nearly an hour before the rain really touched the consumed face of the world, before the earth drank it in and its odour rose—an odour of desire still far from quenched but already transmuted into joy. In this land of fire, the passions of men mount with the waking violence of the sky, but sometimes too they die down with it.

Fernand no longer faced his mother with hateful silence as they sat at table. He did not give himself, but he was very deferential, affected great eagerness to respond, and showed her, during their meals, all the re-

spect due to a woman of her great years. He left her now only after they had taken their coffee. She was too circumspect to pursue her advantage. To herself she would repeat, "I shall deliver him." Alas, although he was no longer cruel to her, he still continued to bleed for the enemy.

In this intermission of the drama the great trees,—tulip-trees, Carolina poplars, planes, and oaks,—waved their wet foliage under the softened sky. Against the glances of strangers they defended mother and son. What is said of the provinces and their gossip is true only of people who live door to door. Nothing is less accessible to the eye, nothing more propitious to mystery, than these estates surrounded by walls and so tightly bound by trees that the people who live within seem to communicate only with one another or with the sky. In town, the attitude of the Cazenaves was deemed most proper: the less we truly mourn the loss of a relative the more it is important to display flagrantly the outward manifestations of sorrow. Thus was the claustration of mother and son interpreted.

Despite the September rains, Fernand still left the house every morning wearing a capuchin cape. He would

follow the path that ran between the garden and the Bordeaux-Cette railway line and read idly, without recognizing in it a horrible presage, the inscription *Hommes* 38-40. Then he would walk home. His mother would not go to meet him, but wait for him to come forward while she sought to read the blank face. From day to day she saw in it more and more relaxation, and a look almost of peace which in the beginning she thought put on. But would he have been able to deceive her as long as that? Some sweetness was flowing through him, some mysterious consolation! He was better, he was getting better without her aid. There had once been a servant in their house who had been sent away because she maintained that it was she who had saved Fernand when he had the scarlatina. A dead woman was saving him now, and his jealous mother could not drive her out. Thus crumbled her last support: she had become useless to Fernand. Never since his earliest childhood—which had already been disfigured by many a caprice—never had she seen in his face this vague, gentle smile, this almost child-like smile. For fifty years this mother had repeated: "What will become of you without me? Good thing I am here. If it were not for me . . ." Alas, she stood before him now

as if she no longer existed: without her, perhaps in spite of her, he had found peace.

The assurance that they are necessary prolongs the life of old women. Many die of despair at being no longer useful. There are some who, already half dead, have revived at the cry for help of a widowed daughter or orphaned children. Félicité could no longer do anything for her son. And in truth, when she had possessed this power over him, had she used it to make him happy? At night, sleepless, in the inimical silence, oppressed by the mortal emptiness of the room behind the wall where the cherished child would never lie again, she repeated to herself: "Any other life would have killed him. Left to himself, he would have died." What did she know of that? The night wind ran over the moors, reached those shifting banks where the last pines parted before the sacred vines of Sauternes, and there, wheeling in wild aimlessness, it swooped down and seized the trees in her garden so violently that wind and trees trembled together.

Just the same, she had one last charge to fulfil for the beloved. The dead consoled his sick spirit, but did nothing for the ills of his flesh. This body born of hers

still belonged to the mother. Fernand refused to receive Dr. Duluc, therefore Félicité went in secret to consult him. Duluc's opinion was that he would first have to be induced to vanquish his distaste for food, "so that he build up his blood." Félicité forced herself to eat in order that he follow her example. With her hardening arteries, she should have been dieting severely, yet she stuffed herself with red meats. The same dialogue was heard at every meal.

"You are not eating, darling."

"You are not, yourself."

"I am, though, you see. Take a bit more of the *filet*."

"I will if you do."

There are martyrs outside the realm of sublimity. One can give up one's life by electing out of all the deaths that which is basest.

Félicité could no longer bear to remain alone. She began to spend her afternoons in restless pacings about the kitchen and to confide in Marie of Lados.

"He couldn't bear her while she was alive. There is no reason why he should miss her now."

"Té, pardine."

"He talks like that about her only to torment me. It is a mistake to show him that that hurts me."

"Hé bé, that's very likely, madame."

Marie of Lados was grinding coffee. But her scared dog-like eyes never left those of her mistress in the fear of being one second late with her words of approval. A docile smile had settled upon her servile face. Yet she had nothing to say when madame added:

"When you die, it is for a long time. The dead go quickly, as they say."

Marie of Lados said nothing, because at the seven o'clock mass, every Sunday, when she came away from the altar wearing the veil of her bridal, in her faithful heart all the sleepers of her race were resurrected, even to the grandfather who had possibly been left to die of hunger, and her pitiless father and mother, and that rogue, Jaouset, who had tupped her up in the heather one summer night in '47, and whose beast of burden she had been for thirty years until the time of the three year old child she had lost. Thus all those who had once peopled an obscure tithe farm would waken in this heart that was filled with God. Marie of Lados even invited

her unknown ancestors into the crowd and grouped them about Him who was there.

"I am not worrying; as they say: the absent are always wrong."

"Et té, yes."

Félicité squared her shoulders and left the kitchen without further speech. She was beginning to know that the absent are always right: it is only they who do not interfere with the workings of love. If we look back upon our life, it seems that we have always been separated from those we loved the most: the reason is perhaps that it is enough that an adored being live by our side for him to become less dear to us. It is the present who are always wrong.

Chapter xii

THE season arrived when, despite the chill in the air, one hesitates to light the first fire in the grate as one might pause before an unknown fate. For this reason the Cazenaves sat before and after each meal in the kitchen, a circumstance which brought them closer together. He limited himself no longer to neutral topics; his words attested a secret development, bore witness to a surprising curiosity at work within him.

"Did you and papa love one another?"

Strange question from a man who until recently thought even less about the dead than about the living. She knew not what to answer, for she was aware that the word love connoted, on her son's lips, a new and deeper meaning. He had therefore to repeat his question more insistently:

"Did you love him as much as me?"

She answered that "it was not the same thing." No, there was nothing commensurate between the insatiable need of domination and spiritual possession inspired in

her by the beloved, upon whom depended all pain and all joy—this life to which her life clung—and the attachment resulting from habit and propinquity which death had so soon disrupted without winning from the widow many tears. Numa Cazenave died alone because, that year, Félicité had felt that Fernand needed to take to the waters at Salies. She knew that her husband had been seized on the highway in front of the Marlet ladies' house, on his way back from his daily game of cards at his club. But she could not remember what had been told her of his last hours in the house of their neighbours, nor that on the previous day he had made a tour of inspection of that which he held dearest in all the world —the alms-house which he administered, that precious property, a bit of whose rich soil he wished over his grave. Nor could she recall that his last words had been, "We are saved by Faith." She did not wish to remember her secret satisfaction that all this had been accomplished in her absence, nothing remaining to be arranged but those material affairs in the settlement of which she took such extreme pleasure. Since she was not habituated to the examination of her conscience, she never suffered by the shameful intoxication she felt over her freedom, alone with the unique object of her passion. Her first

act had been to withdraw him from the academy where his father had insisted he become a board pupil.

"Was papa very sad when my brother Henri died?"

This new question made her shiver. A great fire of vine-shoots was lighting up the rain-washed windows of the kitchen. Marie of Lados was plucking the first ring-dove of the season. Her grandson was seated in a black apron under the lamp, his fingers stopping up his ears while he mumbled to himself the answers to the Catechism: "Are there then three Gods?"—"Forgive me, sister, the three Persons of the Holy Trinity form one single God." This child, Raymond, always spent the wine harvest season with his grandmother because his parents were working for the marquis at Château Yquem.

"We were equally sad, your father and I."

"But you told me it was papa who insisted that little Henri be photographed on his death bed. You thought it was not necessary."

She saw in her mind's eye, in the album, that dead, pallid, blank, terrible face of the lost child. How strange, that Fernand should suddenly be so curious about these

things long past. He was like a man who, absent-mindedly and without preparation, had been on a wonderful journey, and now, long afterwards, was unhappy over what he had not known how to see and would never see again. He was forcing his mother to remember her husband's immense sorrow and the comparative superficiality of her own pain at the death of her younger son. She had been seized then only by terror lest Fernand succumb to the same disease. Later also she became afraid that it would harm him to have had a brother who died of meningitis. She had thought with a feeling of relief that "it might have been him." Good Lord, why did he need to stir up these memories! It was forty years since all that had happened. She looked at him who was standing with his back to the fire, his left thigh twitching as it always did when he ruminated. Ah, the enemy again! Only she could awaken in that old man a dreary curiosity touching things ended, a taste for idle dreams. But Félicité would not have been capable of imagining Fernand's musings at that moment, nor of following their strange meanderings. Thinking of his mother and himself, he was saying within: "I am more to be pitied than she is, for I have had nothing, and she has had me."

The twigs burned up and the night invaded the kitchen. Marie of Lados lighted a pigeon lamp and set it on the table whose oilcloth had been soiled and torn by knives. The child with the Catechism sat resting his head upon his elbows. His hand seemed white, caught there in the thick crow-black hair of his dishevelled head. He was repeating, "Are there then three Gods?" as if he had never known that there was only one God—only one love. From time to time he raised his sleepy eyes to his sombre masters before the hearth. Marie of Lados was washing her dishes in the scullery as she had done for sixty years. When she came back her grandson was asleep, his head resting on the table and his mouth open. She stood gazing at him, and an ineffable smile sent a glow over the whole of her carved box-wood face, her face of a black Virgin. Although he was old enough for his first communion, she took him up into her arms. His charming head hung inert, and from his soiled and scratched legs depended a pair of iron-soled boots like the shoes of a young mule. She carried him off without effort: at the age of twelve years she had been maid to a tithe farmer, a servant of servants, what is called on the moors a *gouge;* every

morning she had walked with the hands of two children in her own, while on her back was strapped the newborn infant—and if the baby cried, she was beaten.

Meanwhile Félicité, having felt that the beloved was staring at her, raised her eyes. How many days it was since he had been so sweetly attentive to her! She was so moved that she arose heavily, put her arm about her son's neck, drew his head down to hers, and said:

"There is my own little son again. He is sorry for his old mamma."

If she had been able to foretell his answer, ah! how she would have suppressed that effusion. Hardly had she spoken when she was forced to receive this blow straight in the heart:

"It is 'she' who wants me to be kind to you."

And he kissed her cheek.

She withdrew her arm. The rumbling of a goods train vanished in the distance. The mother felt the horrible words making their way through her being. She owed her pardon to the enemy: to this shame she was subjected. He loved Mathilde to the point of resuscitating her, and was persuaded of her presence within him,

outside himself. Such a peace descended upon him through that presence as had never been vouchsafed him under the reign of his mother. The sky rained down upon the leaf-strewn paths. In the shadow, a copper basin gleamed like a burning face.

Chapter xiii

THE next evening mother and son sat in the same place. Fernand had said, "We might have a fire in the study," but Félicité had answered, "The winter will be long enough as it is." As a maiden, waiting on that remote moor for a husband to appear, she had spent many watches in a kitchen perfumed as this was to-night by the odours of chestnut and anise. But in the place of a lamp it had been a taper of resin which had lighted up the newly published volume of the *Three Musketeers* that lay upon her knee. At this hour, in those distant years, Marie of Lados had been allowed to sit down, provided she spun as she sat. The dogs would growl because of the wild boars drawn by the presence of the pig. On the table would lie the white napkins used to cover the hollows in the wood which served as plates. Neighbours would leave their wooden shoes outside the door and bring in with them a puff of the resinous night. A farmcart would be heard jolting over the sandy road. This night it was the whistle of a

train which streaked the darkness. Félicité sat listening to the beat of her temples. She said to Marie of Lados that she felt a bar across her stomach and should not have taken a second helping of eel. She had done it so that her son follow her example.

Last night's arrow was still lodged in her flesh. She was silent: not another of those words that might draw upon her a blow. Marie of Lados was teaching Raymond the *Credo* and he was blundering time after time at the same place.

"Begin again."

"I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the life everlasting. . . ."

"And what about the resurrection of the flesh? Begin again."

He ran it off, but like a stubborn donkey, stopped at the same point with a worried and mulish look in his face.

"Begin again."

Once more he trotted off, ran at top speed, and stopped again with his ears sticking straight up before *the resurrection of the flesh.*

"What's wrong with the scamp's head? Repeat it for me twenty times."

The child laughed, as if he were playing the game in which you say very quickly *la grosse cloche sonne*—"the great bell is pealing"—and repeated: *resurrection of the flesh, resurrection of the flesh. . . .*

When he stopped, the master's voice arose:

"Men believe in the resurrection of the flesh."

As always when her religion was questioned, Marie of Lados bristled with defiance and watched her master through her spectacles. She saw that he was not laughing, and felt reassured. Félicité pretended not to know what flesh he had in mind, and mumbled:

"You know that we have promised Marie of Lados not to interfere in these stories about God." And she added: "I am in such pain!"

He said nothing, but paced the kitchen while Marie of Lados lighted a candle and led away the child. Finally, he stood with his forehead against the window pane at the other end of the room, as far as possible from the fire-place. His mother, who had reached a high pitch of uneasiness, called to him, but he did not hear her. Never had she felt the beloved so remote from

her. She saw his great dark form blurred in the obscurity of the night, and she tried to call out to him, but no sound came from her throat. Now she could not see him; he was no longer there; he was sinking, losing himself in the humid darkness of the late autumn. In the end, by an immense effort, she was able to cry out, "Where are you?"

He answered that he was listening to the rain; but he did not turn his face towards her and his forehead remained glued to the pane. Thus he remained a long time in a soothing torpor, listening to the obstinately repeated sound of a single drop on a magnolia leaf that touched the window, and then, when the wind died down, to the brief shower of the leaves, and after that to the last express which ran unhesitatingly by, like a luminous vertigo of speed and danger in the darkness. But another sound arose which he thought he recognized. For some weeks now, after dinner, his mother had been falling into a brief doze, as into a hole: she would snore unpleasantly with her head hanging and her jaw loose. He tried to resume his musing, but he was importuned by that snoring, which now seemed to him louder and more hampered than usual. Fernand turned around, took up the lamp from the table, and

approached the sleeping woman. At first he did not understand: in her clay-coloured face her eyes were open and expressionless. Her tongue protruded a little at the left side of her mouth, which was motionless; the right side was contracting and grimacing.

Chapter xiv

"THEY don't make them like that any more," the doctor said, amazed that the old woman still lived. True, she was paralyzed and unable to speak. A bed had been made up for her in the study on the ground floor, so that she might spend her days in the kitchen.

"There is always some one or something here to occupy her mind," Marie of Lados said. "She listens to the train, and she looks at the clock to see if it is late or not."

She lived now only to wait for Fernand. He came in towards eight o'clock. His morning coffee was ready for him on the table. He would kiss his mother on the brow, and she would sit and watch him eat. In the beginning the vacant, bloodshot stare disturbed him; now he paid scarcely any attention to it. After his noon-day meal, which he took alone, he would sit for a bit opposite the invalid, open the *Petite Gironde,* and despite his indifference to it now, arrange that the open newspaper hide him from her fixed and greedy stare. "She

eats him up with her eyes," Marie of Lados would say. When he had read his newspaper, he was off.

Long after he had gone his mother's eyes would remain focussed upon the door. With her free hand she would rub and rub the same spot on her dress until it shone with wear. The beloved would cross the kitchen for his evening meal, and at last would come the night watch. In those evening hours he did not turn away his face, either because he felt himself half protected by the shadow, or because he had resigned himself to the last charity of permitting that he be adored. All the day she had lived only for this beginning of the night. She sat filling her eyes with him before they became filled with darkness. It was the moment in the third hour when the sponge was offered to the victim. Ah, more bitter than gall to this strained face was the offering of so much love to another than herself. Even so, Félicité Cazenave felt obscurely that it was good that she suffer for her son; but she did not know that she was crucified.

She died in the decline of the winter. The people of Langon say that Fernand Cazenave, bending over the grave as if he sought to throw himself down into it, had

to be held back. Nobody realized that he was only trying to make out, among all those forms in the shadow, the box in which Mathilde had turned again to dust and ashes.

Chapter xv

AT first Fernand thought it was only an importunate solicitor who was turning him away from Mathilde. How was a man to meditate, how was one to withdraw into oneself to those great depths where a beloved soul awaited one, when a pot-bellied little man came running in at all hours, rustling papers, begging one's signature? Fernand's father, Numa Cazenave, had disinherited his son, then a minor, in favour of his wife. It never even occurred to Fernand to protest this illegal will: there are still ancient families in which the Civil Code avails nothing against the all-powerful will of the father. For the rest, when Fernand attained his majority he was well enough satisfied to put upon his mother a burden which by no means overwhelmed her. Each month she let him have what money he needed, and this subjection, of which Mathilde had been so scornful, ended only with the old lady's paralysis.

When Fernand had signed the last document, he persuaded himself that it was the pother over his in-

come and his lands that was destroying the tranquillity, the divine apathy, in which he had so lately been wont to meet Mathilde. Thereafter he learned how easy it was to have an open account at the bank, and he learned too that the pines grew of themselves. He realized now why, on *All Saints Day*, his mother would step heavily into the cabriolet to settle her affairs in the sandy region: there was no other necessity than the urge to inhale the odour of her native pines in that season of the year when the equinoxes are poised on their sombre tips. The widow, who had sold off in haste the vineyard her husband had loved so deeply, would never have agreed to part from a single parcel of the melancholy forests amongst which she had come into the world. Fernand remembered the interminable journeys they made when he was a child, driving across the Sauternes country, then leaving the vines and the happy Garonne to roll over the forest roads, broken and rutted by ox-carts, to the home of grandfather Pélouyre. In those days his mother's face was framed in black ribbons knotted under her chin. Lying with his head far back in the jolting two-wheeled cart, the child would watch the clouded October sky roll by overhead between the black and crowded tips of the pines, and he would cry

out when, from one moving bank to the other, a triangle of birds flew across. When a stream of fresh water caused a dip in the road and made its presence known by a sudden coolness of the air, his mother would cover him with her cloak as with a black wing. She would be afraid lest he catch cold; and if, on the contrary, he pleaded that he was too hot, she would slip an anxious finger between his collar and his neck. Once, the day being stormy, the gad-flies maddened the horse, who broke one of the shafts. It was in a time of year when night fell swiftly. While the peasant-coachman was repairing the shaft, Fernand and his mother waited by the side of the road. He remembered that on this deserted road, already bathed in twilight, he had felt a blessed sense of security because his mother was there. Beyond the high banks of the ash trees he could hear the shuddering of the short ruddy brakes on the burnt off moor. The animal cry of a shepherd calling home his blurred and scattered flock emerged from a block of mist. A blessed sense of security because his mother was there. . . .

Fernand looked around: yes, this was the room in which Mathilde had died. Here were the shells in which her unsmiling face was framed. A climbing bird

sang in its voice of spring. The morning was soaked in smoke and sun. To meet Mathilde he would need to rise up from the remotest depths of his life to the extreme surface of his most recent past. He tried to become tender, thinking the while what a little time they had lived together. No longer did the daughter-in-law hold over the mother-in-law the advantage of being dead: her old enemy had gone to meet her in the third vault on the left against the back wall. One equally with the other belonged henceforward to that which was ended; and Fernand was irritated at the thought of the brief span of his life given to his wife while the enormous shade of his mother lay over all the ended years.

He finished dressing, roamed idly through the garden, and glanced furtively at the study window where there was no longer an old head on the watch to annoy him. Was it because he felt himself no longer spied upon that he had so little desire to be with Mathilde? Had he to be encircled by the flames of his mother's immense, obsessive love before he was able to descend far enough within himself to meet Mathilde? Here is the conflagration extinguished; the brand which once had maddened him now left him of a sudden shivering in a circle of ashes. There are men who are capable of love

only against some one. What whips them onward towards another is the moan of her whom they leave behind.

And now in the path to the south, Fernand stood in idleness, sniffed a lilac, then another, like a heavy drone, while the privet hedge brought him no vision of a face. Marie of Lados called him to luncheon, and he ate more of the freshly gathered peas than was his habit. As he sat alone in the study during his hour of digestion, in the company of the still-present paralytic's bed, he felt a passing sense of well-being, and for the space of a few seconds he thought of his "habit." He decided to telegraph to the rue Huguerie, sat down at the desk and sought, already half-heartedly, the formula of announcement which formerly he wrote in a raging hand because these ideas of flight always came to him after a scene with his mother. Ridicule him as she might with her cry of "You'll come back in a fine state! You'll be in fine form three days from now!" he knew that she would shrivel with anxiety and would be as good as dead until his return. Perhaps if it were not for that anguish he left behind him, he would never have gone at all. Sweet and humiliating were the returns

when, in an atmosphere of scolding joy, of tender ridicule, of infinite pampering, he returned to life. The thought that he might come back from Bordeaux to this deserted house; that he, the mouldy old prodigal, might come back without seeing, as he got down from the train, his mother leaning against the palings of the station fence, one hand up to her eyebrows as she sought to recognize him in the crowd of travellers—this thought froze his blood. Already he was tearing up the telegram into small bits. There was nothing to be done. His mother had wished that he live only through her, suspended from her breath; she had rejected the help of every sort of work, every kind of diversion, every hope and every love: from the depth of the darkness into which she had passed she might congratulate herself upon her accomplishment: the maternal sun had scarcely set when the child whirled in the void, a disorbited earth.

Chapter xvi

THE rare passers-by on the road that ran beside the Bordeaux-Cette line would stop to gaze between the trees at the great mute house of which it was said that no one ever crossed the threshold. For several weeks they could still see the blinds open, behind which Fernand Cazenave spent white nights lying outstretched on Mathilde's bed. But one morning in mid-summer they remained drawn: in what Félicité had called "the enemy's wing" all life was dead. From one Sunday to the next Félicité Cazenave's windows would waken briefly, and after them the windows of the room in which Fernand hoped to find slumber again in the bed where he had slept as a child. But on every couch he remained the miserable prey of insomnia.

And when autumn came, and Michaelmas brought the gypsies in their scarlet tatters to camp against the garden gate and light their stinking fires, Félicité's room, and then Fernand's, were sealed as fast as ever. As in a great body that is nearing its end, life died out of the

extremities of the house and was concentrated in the kitchen. The paralytic's bed, still set up on the lower floor, was henceforward Fernand's. Scarcely had he washed in the morning than he was already seated before the kitchen fire in the very armchair in which his mother had waited for death while devouring him with her eyes.

Overhead, dust was accumulating in the room in which Mathilde had died. It tarnished the glass in the frame of shells behind which was fading a young unsmiling face. Lilies, dried three months past, still stood in the vases which Fernand had but lately filled with such fervour. Marie of Lados grumbled that she could not do everything.

Although she had remained as much as ever a kneeling and trembling serf, Marie now saw too closely the old fallen idol, bereft of its pedestal and wholly delivered up to her. Fernand insisted that she continue to sleep in the dark cupboard next the study, as she had done while nursing her mistress, so that he might be able to call to her at night in a whining voice. She was his supreme refuge, she who had known those who went before, she whose sauces, made from old, long lost receipts, imposed upon the most distant rooms the

odours his grand-parents had loved. Three generations of Péloueyres had worn these washerwoman's hands. But destiny pursued Fernand Cazenave even into this last retreat, and routed him out.

With the wild duck, with the savage ring-dove, the time of the wine harvest brought Raymond back into the kitchen, Raymond who was Marie's grandson and whose parents were cutting the grape at Yquem for the marquis. He had grown to be a handsome, wiry little scamp, with great wide-set ears and a chest burned like a bit of pottery. His pure, naked feet slap-slapped over the worn tiles, while an only half-stifled laugh hovered in his eyes which were like the seed of the purple grape. In the beginning Marie of Lados had been afraid lest he weary the master; for the boy ran ceaselessly in and out, and when he was not leaving the door ajar he was slamming it shut. But Fernand would not allow her to scold him. He followed the little blackbird with the same heavy gaze which had been cast upon him the year before by his silent mother. He would have liked to speak to him, but what did one say to a child. Now and then he would bring forth from a pocket of his jacket a box of cough lozenges, and when Raymond

came within reach he would hold out this bait and whisper, "A sweet?" The boy would stop, breathless and red, and while he was dipping in his hand, Fernand would take hold of his arm. But the boy with the blue-black, feathery, dishevelled hair, his face turned away, would stamp his feet and try to escape.

When she was certain that the presence of her grandson did not displease her master, Marie of Lados began to plan to keep him in the house through the winter. Fernand did not scent the danger. Félicité would never even have taken the time to consider such a request: she knew that "with those people one must never create obligations." After having sent Marie of Lados back to her ovens and calling her a slut, she would have been careful to repeat to her darling son: "If you didn't have me! Good thing I am here. Except for me, you would have been taken in by them. You can't see as far as the end of your nose. You have about as much defence against them as a baby. If I didn't look after things, the first person who came along would do you in the eye." But she was no longer there to walk ahead of him and hold aside the branches. He had no premonition of danger, even when Raymond's parents had to be begged to leave the child with Monsieur Cazenave, and pre-

tended to give him up only as a favour to Marie's master.

This voracious scamp, his hands covered with scars and stained with ink, who took no more heed of a silent master than of the sideboard or the clock, had soon won Fernand's displeasure and repugnance when he saw that Marie of Lados was relaxing her attention to him. She neglected the growling old idol for the radiant child of her blood. The soup could not be eaten before he had come in. It was the clatter of his wooden shoes upon the steps outside that summoned them to table. A benign sore throat, which Raymond contracted, sufficed to induce Marie of Lados to desert the cupboard where she had been sleeping near her master. The worst was that the boy's mother installed herself in the house upon pretext of looking after him. Marie of Lados was terribly afraid of this daughter, a dark-skinned, toothless moor-dweller in whose beak and eye gleamed the ferocity of a hen. The father, who worked nearby in the wine stores, came home evenings. He was an enormous, magnificently set-up native of the Garonne, but with a belly bulging out of blue, beltless worker's trousers, a ruined Hercules inwardly undermined by the mortal

sweetness of the Sauternes. Although the boy was on the way to recovery, these two now sat nightly at the kitchen table while Fernand was served by himself in the dining-room, where a freezing cold persisted despite the fire in the grate. During his brief meals he heard their laughter and their shrieking; but when Marie of Lados opened the door to serve him he could hear only their whispered *patois* and the clatter of spoons and plates until, the door once more shut, they began again to shriek.

They did not know that Fernand Cazenave was no longer alone in that cold room whose simulated yellowish wainscoting he had always hated. When he raised his eyes from his plate there arose before him, in the seat which for half a century had been her throne, the majestic and dominating form of his mother, yet more imposing in death than in life, her divine and angry visage bringing shame upon her feeble son. What! he would not drive this vermin out of his house? In his mind Fernand re-created the dread goddess whose frown was enough to disperse stewards, brokers, tithe farmers, and servants of every ilk. This old Aeneas ready to sink held out his suppliant hands to the all-powerful *genitrix*. Vanquished, he worshipped her who had been strong. His admirable mother! How had the sneering

little schoolmistress dared to cross her? Mathilde, you whose ghost too now takes its place at this table, far from the fire, in the draught, as when you were alive, you are no longer deified. But Fernand still remembered that rounded back, that beaten air, those yellow eyes of a hunted cat.

The house shook at the passage of an express whose rumblings over the Garonne were drowned out by the screams from the kitchen. The maternal fury, that delirium which so often had sent the massive woman into a stamping rage, gripped Fernand. Already he was straightening up, moving towards the door, when Marie of Lados came in with a milky dish. She looked at her master with those eyes apt for the reading of signs of a storm, and said in a choked voice:

"I'll go tell 'the daughter' that she is disturbing monsieur."

She went back trembling to the kitchen. "The daughter," inspired in her that terror which all old people on the moors feel in the presence of their children. (Daughter and son-in-law, after having torn from her every *sou* of her miserable savings, still accused her of having money secreted away.) During a few seconds Fernand

heard the old woman speaking alone. Then in a horrible throaty voice the daughter began to shout in their *patois*. Nothing better attested the strange isolation in which Fernand had lived than his ignorance of the dialect of his native region. With his ear against the door, he gathered that Marie of Lados was standing off her children. But what were they asking her to do? *"Moussu"* returned too frequently in their speech for him to doubt that he was the subject of their argument. The better to hear them, he left the dining-room and went out into the vestibule, where his steps echoed in the vast hall, lighted up at both ends by the clear rectangles of frozen night which came in through the glass doors.

He walked the length of a corridor which brought him to the kitchen door at the foot of the wide staircase. Shivering in the darkness, he heard not only *"Moussu"* but the oft-repeated words, *"lou drôle,"* the scamp. Marie of Lados cried out in French, "But I tell you he hasn't even once asked about the scamp." Maybe they thought she didn't know monsieur! As if he was the kind of man to bother about the scamp! For a few days the child had amused him. And now he was through. They didn't think he could be forced. . . . The

shrieking daughter interrupted her: "Of course! You could force him to do anything you please. He can't get on without you, the old dish-rag that he is! But you don't care about your family. . . ." And they began again to shout in their *patois*.

Fernand had straightened up to his full height. His mother was pushing him forward; she was in him; she possessed him. What was he waiting for? Why did he not walk in upon them without warning and kick over the table? But his legs refused to stir; his heart beat wildly. "Rest a bit first." He slumped down upon the half-shut woodbox. The cover banged down under his weight and the curt sound interrupted their cries beyond the door. He got up and went back to the study, where the fire had been allowed to die. When he was abed, his candle out, he saw that Marie of Lados had neglected to draw the blinds, as well as to feed the fire. He could see, as he lay, the purity of the night. It had rained all day, and the drops fell from the trees in a supernatural silence. There was nothing in the world save this tranquil sound of tears. A sense of peace, of detachment, went over him as if he could feel beyond his anguished life, beyond his own duration upon earth, a kingdom of love and silence in which his mother

was a different person to the one who had just possessed him like a maenad—a kingdom in which Mathilde turned upon him a relaxed and forever pacified face, a saintly smile.

In the daylight the rustling of the rain awoke him. How he hated these dark winter mornings! He could not even remember that he had so recently had a presentiment of mysterious beatitude. The whole dirty pool of his rancour flowed back into him with this sombre morning. He ached and gathered together his old body under his blanket. He saw his day stretching before him like a deserted sandy road in the burnt off moors. He shut his eyes to gain time, to await in unconsciousness the oasis of breakfast. He lay with his face to the wall and pretended to be asleep while Marie of Lados lighted the fire and set beside him his fiery hot coffee and milk.

Chapter xvii

AFTER the noon-day meal Fernand Cazenave sat before the kitchen fire. How fearful he would have been if he had known how closely, sitting snugly in the arm-chair in the half-darkness of that dripping December day, he resembled his mother in the days of her decline! Marie of Lados came in. She had one arm about her weakened grandson who was out of bed that day for the first time since his illness. She watched her master, trying to divine his thoughts, but his eyes never left the flame. Then she pushed the frightened scamp towards him and said:

"What do you say to monsieur?"

Fernand never so much as turned his head. Marie went obstinately on:

"He had a hard time, poor boy. He has grown very thin. Nothing but a pair of eyes in his face now."

She felt of his arms. The master had taken up a pair of tongs, but his hands shook so that he put them down again. Finally, he stared icily at the little scamp. And

he, who had never been able to speak *patois,* remembered the pair of words that were so often on the lips of grandfather Pélouеyre and Félicité Cazenave when they wanted man or beast to vanish from their sight:

"Bey-t-en!" (Get out!)

He had stood up and still resembled his mother—but now his inflexible and redoubtable mother. Marie of Lados sprang back with a look of terrified worship and drew with her into the scullery the wild-haired scamp who was hopping like a sick blackbird.

Fernand sat in his study until evening. At four o'clock Marie of Lados brought in a lamp and drew the blinds, and there he remained until cries from the kitchen told him that Raymond's mother was there. Again he went to sit motionless in the darkness on the woodbox. "No, no," Marie of Lados was begging; "he'll have a stroke if I do." Then again the guttural *patois* of the daughter drowned her out. She was shouting that she herself would lay the table, but why in that threatening tone? Fernand grew cold; he went back to his study where he stood motionless, looking into the fire. At seven o'clock Marie appeared to announce that monsieur was served. She took up the lamp and raised it high

as she did every evening, moving aside to let her master pass, so that he saw the light fall full upon the aged and decomposed face. He crossed the kitchen, pushed in the dining-room door—and understood. On the white cloth, across from his cover another had been laid; and as the table was very high, the daughter had heaped up books upon the chair so that Raymond would be able to eat his soup without inconvenience.

The child was crying behind the door. He dared not go in, despite the orders of his mother who had begun to raise her voice. Meanwhile Fernand felt the birth and swelling of a wave of fury within him. His mother was penetrating him, invading and possessing him, and he was thrilled. He poured out a full glass of wine which he drank off at one swallow, then swept out his arm and the plates meant for the child broke noisily on the tiled floor. After this clatter, one would have said there was not a soul alive in the kitchen. The master went through the door. He saw first the chicken-eyed daughter, and then Marie of Lados standing behind her with clasped hands upraised. Again he remembered the words of *patois* used by his mother to drive away men and beasts:

"Annèt ben!" (Get out, all of you!)

The daughter came forward and began to cry volubly that it was monsieur who had wanted the scamp to stay; he had even been the cause of the boy's losing a good place; it had always been understood that monsieur would look after him; the child had grown very fond of monsieur. . . . Intimidated by his silence and his icy stare, she stopped. He repeated:

"Annèt ben!"

Beside herself, the daughter shrieked that they would not go by themselves, they would take the old woman with them. Whether Marie of Lados understood or not, she refrained from protest, turned her head away, and covered her face with her hands. The scullery door opened and the child peered into the room with the snout of a fox taken in a trap. Meanwhile the daughter, confident that this threat had brought Fernand around, was showing her hardened gums and black mouth in a smile of triumph. That smile delivered Fernand utterly up to the maternal demon. His shaking fingers hunted long through his purse for a hundred-franc note, which he flung to Marie of Lados. (It was the daughter who picked it up.) Then he opened the door, and in a mild voice he said to the servant:

"You will come to-morrow for your box."

She looked at him. At that moment it was not only her master, but all her defunct masters who were sending her away. As she stood without stirring, he repeated in old Péloueyre's very voice:

"Bey-t-en!"

And he threw back his head, his throat swollen like the throat of a Juno,—the living image of his mother.

Chapter xviii

FERNAND CAZENAVE heard the clatter of their wooden shoes along the Bordeaux-Cette line. He re-filled his glass, drained it again, and left the room. The last train had rumbled over the river; the house had ceased to shake. Thin clouds were scudding under an invisible moon, but its light still came through, and Fernand, standing in the middle of the vestibule without a lamp, was able to see his own body in the looking-glass beside the door. Deeper than on other nights, the silence encircled him; yet he did not remember to have remarked the breath of Marie of Lados during those other watches. But a single sleeper breathing in a distant room so stirs the atmosphere, that without our knowing it, a little wave of human warmth rolls forward to beat against our heart.

For the first time in his life, therefore, Fernand Cazenave knew the meaning of silence. It might have been because, as on the previous night, he heard again the interminable dripping of the branches, that single tran-

quil sound of tears about the dead house, that his soul was filled once more with peace at the approach of the kingdom in which his mother was at once his mother and some one else; the same who had inspired him to drive away an old docile servant, and yet some one else, some one still alive though living elsewhere, some one from whom there reached him on this night an appeasement of all anger, a distaste for all duration, a mysterious detachment from life. At least, so he believed.

He did not think of the wine he had drunk, nor did he recall that often a slight intoxication suffices to induce in us a presentiment of eternity. The cold drew him out of this sweet torpor. He shivered all over and his teeth chattered like the teeth of dying Mathilde. He followed the hall that ran through "the enemy's wing" and went shivering from room to room until he reached the one where the moonlight sifting through the blinds lit up a frame of shells and drew on the wall the delicate shadows of faded lilies.

On this landing there was a door into the garret, which ran across the whole house from wing to wing above the vestibule. He went into it. A dormer window was receiving, as if it had been water, the pure

clarity of the night, and spreading it over a chest that was painted with tulips. Fernand, stumbling against dead things, opened the door of the tiny room where Marie of Lados had slept before coming down to be near her dying mistress. She had never given up going there to dress, and continued to store there, in a black box, all that she owned in the world. Here the terrible cold smelled of laundry soap and the clothes of those who work for others. Narrower than that of the garret, the window of this cupboard concentrated the nocturnal limpidity upon a plaster Virgin with open hands, and left in the shadow above the bed a crucified body. The bed was covered with an old bit of cretonne designed with human figures, the single glowing spot, the unique wealth, of this cell. Marie of Lados would have rejected it, had she been told that it was "worth money." It was on this cloth that Fernand sat down; it was here, his body thrust forward, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands, that he wept. The cold froze the tears on his cheeks. His body was quaking. He became afraid to die alone in this cubicle, went out through the garret, and clung to the banister while with trembling knees he made his way down the stairs and to his bed.

He could not sleep. Upon his chest, upon his limbs, he felt an infinite weight. Was he dreaming that some one was walking in the garden? No, since Péliou was suddenly barking furiously—and was as suddenly quiet. It occurred to Fernand that he had forgotten to lock the doors. He heard the outer door give way to gentle pressure, but he felt no fear. Steps moved off in the direction of the kitchen; then a light filtered through on the floor. He shut his eyes and opened them again. Marie of Lados was holding the lamp, one of her hands serving as shade and beating down its glow upon her black-Virgin face. But she did not come forward: she was waiting for him to call.

"Marie!"

Then she put down the lamp and came over to him, and he felt upon his forehead her calloused hand.

843
M442f
Mauriac, Francois
AUTHOR
The family (Les Pélouеyres)
TITLE
DATE DUE
BORROWER'S

843
M442f
LIBRARY
CHATHAM COLLEGE